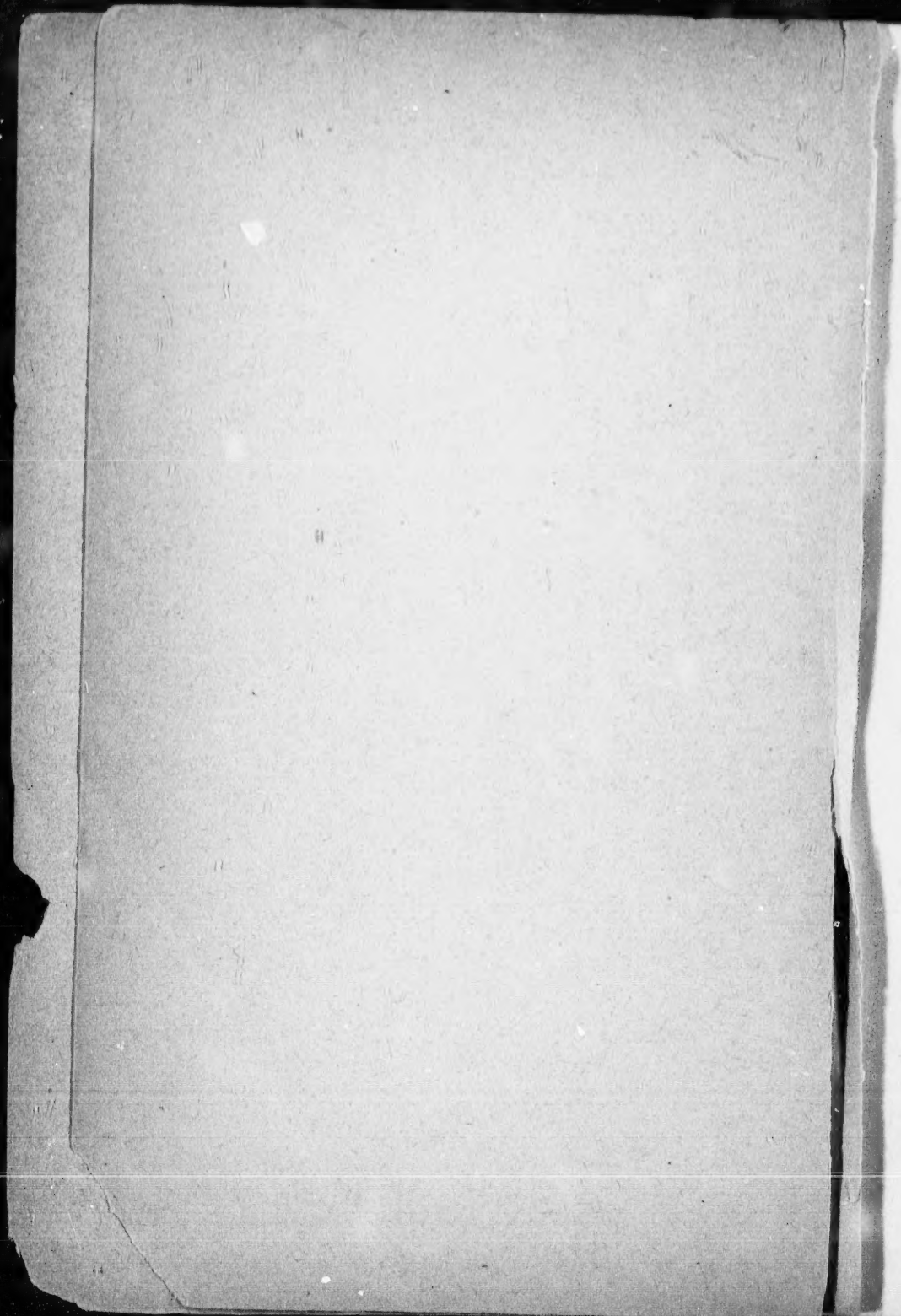


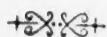




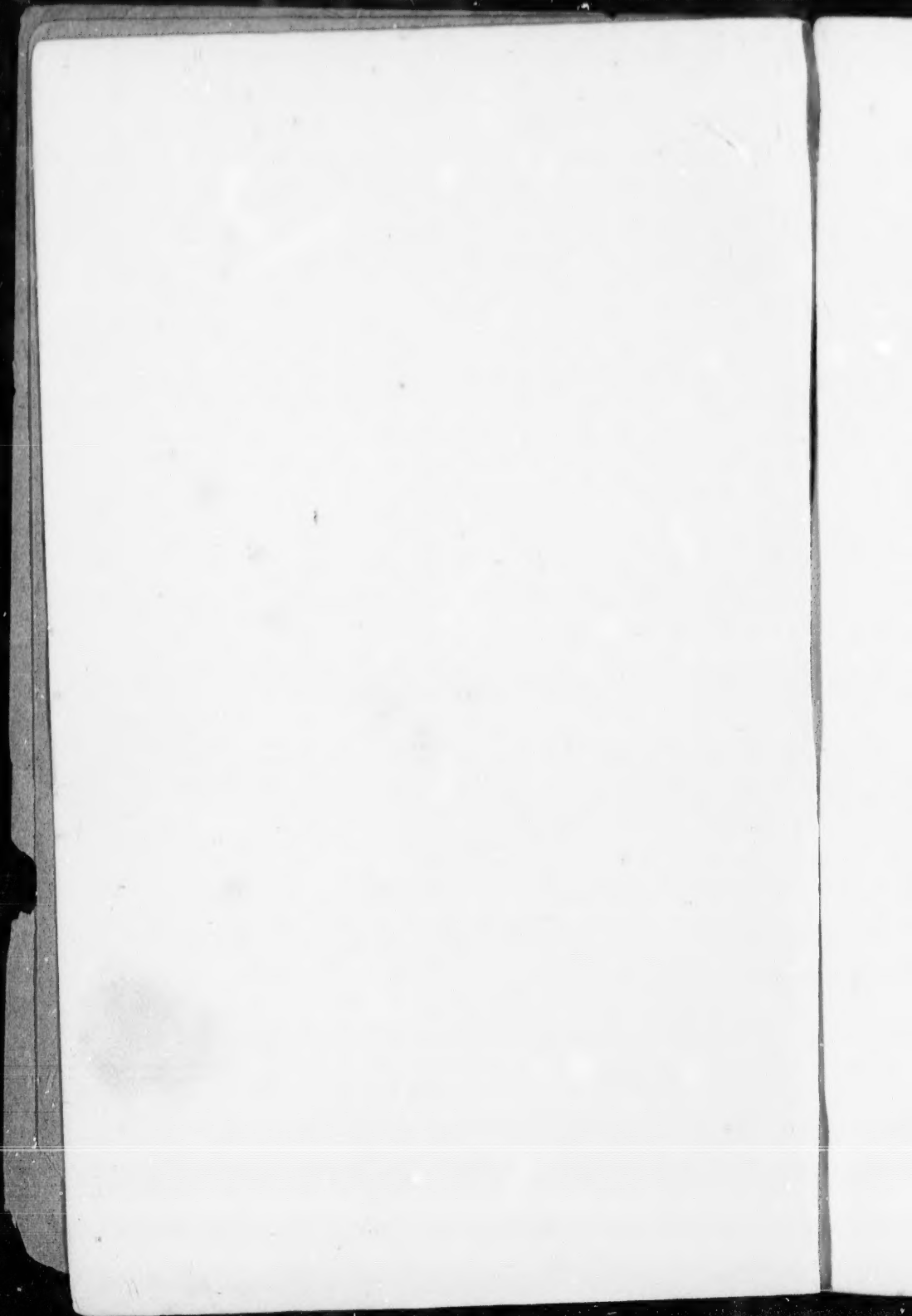
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THE BLACKGUARD.

BY
ROGER POCOCK.



WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED,
LONDON, NEW YORK, & MELBOURNE.



THE BLACKGUARD



CHAPTER I

“Think of your sins,
What made you a soldier a-serving the Queen :
God save the Queen,
And God save the duffer who thinks of to-
morrow,
God save the man who remembers his sorrow,
God save the man who can think of the past,
Sundown at last :
Here's rest for the past, and here's hope for
the morrow !”

THAT is exactly what the bugle said to a man who was sitting on the edge of the bench-land in the evening calm. He was a very big man, dressed in a grey woollen undershirt, worn-out riding-breeches with a two-inch yellow stripe down the legs, and jack-boots. By his

The Blackguard

side lay a broad grey slouch-hat, such as cowboys wear ; on his knees a bath-towel—dry ; and in his neighbourhood lingered a faint aroma of stables. The man's bare arms were like the thighs of an average sinner, his shoulders, thighs, breast, neck, all of gigantic strength and beauty, a sight that would have appealed to any athlete as beyond the loveliness of women.

The setting sun just touched his wavy, crisp, black hair with a lustre of metal. Again, his face, still, strong, silent, had an odd suggestiveness of a bronze statue, that of something Greek but uncanny, a faun, perhaps, or a satyr. The hair, sweeping low over his brows, might almost conceal incipient horns ; his ears might have been tufted ; his features defying all the rules—stuck on anyhow ; the subtle devilry of his deep black eyes, the ugly fascination, the whimsical dignity ; the bearing lofty, defiant, almost magnificent ; and again, an air, indefinite enough, of sorrowful majesty ;—how well everything about the man fitted one name—the Blackguard.

That was La Mancha's name, by con-

The Blackguard

sent of the five troops of the Mounted Police ; and somehow the common use of it conveyed no sense of reproach but rather of endearment. From the Commissioner down to the smallest recruit the whole five hundred were half-afraid of him, except one man ; yet no civilian ventured to speak ill of the Blackguard, or he would have had his head punched. To say bad things about the Blackguard was to slight the Force.

And the one man who did not fear this latter-day satyr, who ruled him as mind rules matter, was a certain little Corporal, who, with a neat briar pipe well alight, was picking his dainty way over the gravel—coming down from the camp in the evening calm. This was Corporal Dandy Irvine, with a sunburnt face, a neatly-pointed moustache, the buttons of his scarlet jacket glowing like gold in the light, whose clothes always fitted, whose forage-cap was correctly poised on three hairs, whose boots and spurs were always brilliantly polished. And now he just touched the Blackguard to show that he was present, and sat down beside him without any remarks whatever. So, for

The Blackguard

five minutes, the two looked gravely out over the valley like Dignity and Impudence, both too lazy to speak.

They were looking across the Kootenay Valley—the upper Kootenay, from a tongue of the bench-land made by the deep gulch of Wild Horse Creek where it came down from the mountains. At their backs rose the huge timbered foothills of the Rocky Mountains; opposite, across the vast Kootenay trench, rose the still mightier foothills of the Selkirks, and high above the deepening purple of the forests soared the clear cool azure of the snows up into the silence of those sharp-cut Alps, reaching away forever and forever to north and south against the roseate translucent afterglow. Down yonder the river wandered crimson through misty prairies, where the trees stood in clusters pointing up, as the sentinel stars came one by one on guard.

“Dandy,” said the Blackguard, without stirring, “lend me five dollars.”

Without comment the little Corporal took from his breast-pocket a slender roll of notes, one of which he surrendered.

The Blackguard

"Five dollars." The Blackguard took the crisp paper, spreading it out upon his knee. "I was wondering whether there was anybody in the world who cared five dollars for me. Here, take it back—I don't want it."

"Stick to it, Blackguard,—stick to it. You've been fined a month's pay every month since last December ; and I guess you'll keep up the motion every month till your time's out—stick to it."

"I'll keep up the motion," said the Blackguard vindictively. "I'll get drunk to-night. They fine me because they can't spare me off duty, and because they've jolly well proved that there isn't a guard-house in the Territories strong enough to hold me over night."

The Corporal chuckled. "How about number five cell at Regina?"

"Number five cell be ——. It was nine months last time."

"Look here, La Mancha. That nine months sticks in my gizzard. I ought to have been punished, not you."

"Take off your serge!" By taking off the serge jacket which bore his double chevron as corporal, Dandy could

The Blackguard

surrender the protection given by his rank, and become a plain trooper like the Blackguard. The summons was a challenge to fight.

"I'll keep on my serge," said Dandy ;
"you're too big, Blackguard."

"Then don't talk rot about number five cell. Here's Pup La Mancha, my brother, deserting, and you and me and that fool Pocock overtaking him at Lane's stopping-place. Suppose you let him go, Shifty Lane reports you at headquarters. Suppose you don't let him go, you get my brother, the Pup, a year in the cells. Suppose I let him escape and take his place, I get nine months. After all, what's nine months? I shall be blazing drunk to-night, and maybe get it again!"

"Why can't you behave yourself?"

"Why should I, Dandy? Now you've got a mother, Dandy, who gets a letter from you every week.

"'Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling
gloom,

Lead Thou me on.'

She's the kindly light, I suppose, but mine went out. And you've got a girl,

The Blackguard

Dandy, who believes you're a brass saint with a tin halo, which you're not, and who loves you except when she happens to love some other Johnny, which is all the same thing. I've been in love, too, with heaps of girls, two or three at a time generally, hating each other like so many Antipopes. I have a photograph-album—you've seen it in my kit-bag—of all the girls I ever really loved, except a small collection which got burnt up in a hotel fire. I tried to be good, more or less, for each of them, except when they liked me bad; and even now I could be tolerably straight, with an occasional holiday to let off steam, if I had somebody who cared."

"I care," said Dandy moodily.

"Oh, you don't count. You're only a whiff, a spit, and a damn like a Russian cigarette."

"But you have people—your family."

"Yes, I've got a brother in London, an awful snob,—also a sister."

"La Mancha, I saw the name in some paper—the Duke of—Duke of Something—Spanish Ambassador to the Court of St. James'—but, Blackguard!"—

The Blackguard

"Well?"

"Is that your"—

"Yes, that's the Snob."

"But from what I saw he must be an awful bad lot."

The Blackguard's eyes flashed ominously. "Drop that. If you talk bad about my people I'll have to chuck you into the river. Then you'll get wet."

"And you'll be sorry. Are all your people such swells?"

For answer the Blackguard drew from beneath his undershirt a crucifix which hung from a slender chain of gold about his neck. "That's from one of my relations,"—he kissed it reverently,—"Isabella—God bless her—of Spain."

"Why, Blackguard, are you of the Blood-Royal—a prince?"

"Not quite that,—I suppose in English I should be Lord So-and-so. Regimental Number 1107, Constable La Mancha, my lord—ahem—you are charged with having, on the night of the 18th instant, been drunk, and assaulted the guard; also with having, on the night of the same instant,

The Blackguard

set the guard-room on fire; also with having, on the same night, *et cetera*.— Sounds well,—eh, Dandy?"

The Corporal laughed. "We've been together four years now, and this is the first time you told me a word about yourself. We have lots of gentlemen in the ranks—I suppose I'm a gentleman myself if it comes to that, but"—

"A fat lot of use it is, eh?"

"That's so. What were you doing all those years in England?"

"Military attaché at the Legation until I had my last big row with the Snob. You see, I met a woman at a Foreign Office reception—a regular cat—and found her out for a she-spy in the secret service of—let's say Russia. When the Snob took to fooling around after her, I warned him; but he only thought I was jealous, and called me names. So we had a row, and I gave him a black eye, Eton style. Then I had to give him another to make it even. After that, of course, all was over between us. I took some keys off him, plundered the safe, told him what

The Blackguard

train I should catch, the name of the steamer—gave him every chance if he wanted a public scandal. He didn't want a scandal—might have cost him his job, so now he's the Ambassador and I'm the Blackguard. That's all."

"Poor devil!"

"Yes, poor devil," yawned the Blackguard cheerfully, as he stood up to stretch himself. "Anything fresh?"

"Nothing much." The Corporal was brushing some dead grass from his breeches. "There's a civilian at the officers' mess, came from Golden City by the 'Duchess' and rode over from Windermere. He's bound for the Throne Mine."

The Blackguard looked across the valley and saw one glimmering light far up on the mountains—the light of the Throne Mine.

"Well," he said, "I'm off to the canteen."

"Don't be a fool! Come and play poker in my tent."

"What's the use?" The Blackguard laid his hand on Dandy's shoulder.

"You're a good fellow. I know jolly

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The Blackguard

well what you mean, but I've got a devil
—Good-night—and an appointment with
Mother Darkie."

Then the Corporal turned sorrowfully
away.

CHAPTER II

"Women and wine and war!
War and wine and love!
With a sword to wear, and a steed to ride,
And a wench to love—give me nought beside,
But a bottle or so at the eventide:
Women and wine and war!"

Women and wine and war!
War and wine and love!
Oh, war's my trade, and wine's my play,
Wine crown the night, and war the day—
With a kiss or so in a casual way:
Women and wine and war!"

Women and wine and war!
War and wine and love!
Here's a broken head, and a drunken spree,
And the blue-eyed wench deserted me,
Go! lecture the woman, and let me be:
Women and wine and war!"

So sang the Blackguard, while all his
riotous gang roared out the chorus, and
Mother Darkness, perched on the bar

The Blackguard

with my Lord of Misrule's big arms about her waist, rocked to and fro, crying "Lordy ! Lordy !" at intervals.

"Boys," said the Blackguard, "who wouldn't be a soldier at fifty cents a day and die for a living !"

"Shut yer jaw ! Can't you drink, Blackguard, without making speeches ? Why, the smell of a cork sets you off. You'd talk the legs off a brass monkey !"

"What I say is," shouted Mutiny Saunders, in hot argument with his chum, Tribulation Jones,— "what I sez is, when a man's got an 'orse and looks after that 'orse, and grooms that 'orse, and gits to like 'is 'orse, and some 'alf-breed hoffer wants to take that 'orse away from 'im, and 'e bucks stiff-legged,—what I sez is, 'air on 'im !"

"Camp on 'is trail !" suggested Tribulation,— "make 'is life a burden to 'im. Oh, my Gawd, tear a bone out of 'im ! What do you say, Blackguard ?"

"Oh, keep it till the break of day.

" 'Women and wine and war !'

Eh, Mother Darkness ? Come and be Mrs. Blackguard. Boys, celebrate our

The Blackguard

uptis, dance at our wedding, for
Mother Darkness is to be Queen of the
May—and share my Government straight,
and pay my debts, and take in washing,
and be my wife."

He kissed her ugly black face, while
she rocked to and fro muttering "Lordy!
Lordy!"

"I'll take a scarecrow in—I'll have a
bally scarecrow for my wife!" shouted
Billy Boy out of a corner. "Send round
the poison, Blackguard."

"Yes, and to the blazes with poverty.
Mother Darkness, my last dollar for the
drinks—for now I'm clean-busted."

So while the drinks went round once
more the Blackguard snatched up his
guitar, and caught the lilt of some grand
old Andalusian dance—

"Sing with me,
Carita;
Dance with me,
Carita,
Let the mad world sing the lilt of our gladness!
Dance with me,
Carita;
Merrilie,
Carita,
Let the glad earth catch the lilt of our madness!"

The Blackguard

The log-cabin allowed but space to swing a cat, as the saying is—although nobody had ever swung cats in it since its erection a month ago. Kept by a motherly negress, enterprising in the matter of illicit whisky, this shanty served as a canteen for the camp, levied half the available pay of D Troop, occasioned more trouble than all the Red Indians in Kootenay, and generally played the very deuce with public morals. As to the men who sat on soap boxes and barrels round the walls, or perched on the bar, giving cheek to Mother Darkness, well, of course, they should have been in bed long ago, and certainly they ought to have abstained from the trash which passed current at a shilling a drink for whisky; but then—the shanty was by proclamation “out of bounds”; to be found in it meant a heavy fine; to be caught beyond the limits of the camp after “lights out” meant punishment, and to drink illicit liquor was officially accounted worse than all the deadly sins; so, according to the natural history of man, there was every inducement for a roaring night. And the men? To the stature and

The Blackguard

strength of an English Life Guardsman add the intelligence, courage, and impudence of a Black Watch veteran, and you have the prescription for a constable of the North-West Mounted Police. There is not in all the Empire a more splendid corps than this widely-scattered regiment of irregular cavalry, in time of peace hare-brained, half-mutinous, almost beyond the power of human control ; in many a time of instant danger approved for stern endurance, utter loyalty, and headlong courage. These men in the shanty, waking the night with song and chorus, had each of them done great deeds of arms, for which nobody in authority or otherwise had given as much as a "Thank you." The tale has been told at many a camp fire, how a constable was sent once to track down a mad Indian who had killed and eaten his children. Months afterwards the Officer Commanding at Fort Edmonton was interrupted in the midst of a muster parade by a bearded civilian in rags, who walked up to him and halted at three paces with a correct salute. "What the deuce do you want?" said the Officer Commanding.

The Blackguard

"Come to report, sir."

"Who the devil are you?"

"Constable Saunders, sir,—got my prisoner in the guard-room."

That was Mutiny Saunders, who had tracked his victim fearlessly into goodness knows what awful recesses of the northern forest, who had been struck off the strength of the Force as "missing," but who never deigned to report himself alive until he carried out an almost impossible order and vindicated the majesty of British Justice by making the most extraordinary arrest in all the annals of the Empire.

Tribulation Jones, now arguing with Mutiny about a horse, was one of the seventy-five men who took part in the "Poundmaker Racket," when Crozier's Troop, confronted by thousands of armed Indians, charged, rode them down, wheeled, charged again, scattered them and carried off a necessary prisoner, and all without a single shot being fired.

Billy Boy, now howling out the chant of "Old King Cole," once drove a team two hundred and ten miles in two days without killing his horses, and in the darkest days

The Blackguard

of the North-West Rebellion carried despatches right through the enemy's lines.

Mackinaw Bob, leaning back against the shanty wall very drunk, was one of the thirty men who in Fort Walch defied for three days the largest Indian army ever raised, to wit, the Sioux forces of Sitting Bull, when they came to Canadian territory triumphant after the massacre of General Custer's 7th Cavalry.

The Blackguard? But the Blackguard's story is the purport of this present writing. He had taken up the bad old song called "Limerick," of many naughty verses, strung to an idiotic tune—

"Ho, there was a non-com. at Macleod
Who got so infernally proud
That he busted his vest
With the swell of his chest,
And they bore him away in a shroud.

Yah, there was a recruit at headquarters
Who loved all the officers' daughters,
But he couldn't choose which,
So occasioned a hitch,
And broke all the girls' hearts at headquarters."

The Blackguard

"Boys, who's this Tenderfoot they've got at the officers' mess?"

"I found the duffer," said one of the boys just in from Windermere patrol,— "he'd strayed like a something Maverick—didn't know who he was or where he belonged to—lost his led horse with all his dunnage. I rounded him up and headed him in towards camp. His name's Ramsay."

"Is he any good?"

"No. Puts on enough side for a Governor-General, called me my good fellah—the blawsted Henglish jumped-up, copper-bottomed, second-hand, brass-bound swine."

"Where is he going to sleep?"

"Colonel's tent, I guess, unless the old man turns up unexpected; but he's still at the mess with a brandy-and-soda and two blanked adjectived Inspectors. I want to know what we've done that he should be palmed off on a white man's camp instead of old Isadore's Reserve, the rat-tailed, lop-eared, pigeon-livered son of a"—

"Boys, Providence has sent him here to be kicked, and shall we dispute the

The Blackguard

wisdom of Providence? I'll see to it, you fellows; and now, unless somebody's got credit with my future wife for the drinks, let us close the exercises by singing in a loud voice the words of that venerable summons known as the 'General Salute.'"

So the boys took up the goodly measure to a strenuous accompaniment of beaten pans in an uproar worthy of Pandemonium—

"Now here comes the Gen-e-ral, all venom and spleen,
And he rides like a sack, with a string round the middle, Oh
His head's full of feathers, and his heart's all woe,
So 'present' while the band plays 'God save the Queen!'"

CHAPTER III

"Soldier, soldier, where are your breeches,
pray?

Soldier, soldier, get up and dust ;
Where the deuce have you hidden your
brains away?

Soldier, soldier, get up and dust.
Busted the bugler? Send him to hospital ;
Can't you shut up that confounded row?
Show a leg, and no damned profanity—
Get out and sweat for a shillin' a day."

WHEN the bugle had concluded making these remarks, when the echoes of the hills were calling back their greeting, the valley stirred under its blanket of mist, the Alps blushed red to the sun's first kiss, and the shadows of night ran to covert among the scented pines. The bugler was raking up a fire in front of the guard-tent with a view to his morning coffee, the picket was lounging drowsily

The Blackguard

home from the horse lines, and from every tent came sleepy execrations.

"Show a leg there! Get a move on you! Who the —— told you to tread on my legs! Réveille! Oh, give us a rest; who said Réveille?"

The bugler sounded "Dress!" and there was a further stirring as though half the tents would be overthrown. One by one the canvas flaps were thrown open, as men came out with their towels in search of tin basins generally mislaid. Then, it seemed but a few minutes afterwards, the bugler set the brazen tormentor to his lips to call stables—

"Oh, come to the stables and water your horses,
And groom them a little and give them some hay,
Groom them damned little and give them bad hay,
Government grooming and Government hay;
For if you don't do it the Colonel will know it,
Then orderly-room—and the devil to pay."

At that the troop fell in, each man with his curry-comb and brush, some in canvas jackets, some without, one or two in deer-skin coats, all with long boots, and other-

The Blackguard

wise compromising their civilian appearance with traces of uniform, except the Orderly Sergeant, who wore correct undress. He had to bring parade to attention and call the roll, then, after a smart numbering off, to give the "Fours right, quick march!" which sent the column briskly away to the horse lines. Half an hour sufficed to water horses, clean up bedding, groom and feed, then the beasts were left in charge of a picket detailed to herd them to pasture for the day. The parade was dismissed, and the men strolled home to their tents thinking audibly on the subject of breakfast.

"Constable La Mancha," the Orderly Sergeant had been consulting his notes.

"Well?"

"Consider yourself under arrest."

"Kiss my socks!" said the Blackguard.

"Why, what have I done?" he continued innocently.

"Done? You'll find out soon enough."

"Yes, Sergeant—but which charge in particular—I've got to prepare my defence."

"Oh, give us a rest! Get off to breakfast,—I'm busy."

The Blackguard

"'Twas ever thus!" said the Blackguard sorrowfully. "Thank goodness, the Colonel's away." But even as he turned abruptly towards the tents a mounted man coming up from behind barely avoided riding over him. "What d'you think you're doing?" cried the Blackguard angrily. The rider swerved gracefully clear with a touch of the rein, a hard-featured, clear-eyed veteran, grey with long service, sitting his horse with an easy dignity, dressed in rough frontier clothes, weary, travel-stained—the Colonel himself.

La Mancha saluted in haste, startling the horse into a succession of desperate plunges. "Just like my luck!" groaned the Blackguard, and would have gone on towards the camp fires of his mess, but the Colonel, alighting now before his tent on the far side of the parade ground, called to him, "La Mancha!"

"Yes, sir!" the Blackguard ran to the tent.

"Just take my horse to the l'ies, unsaddle, give him a rub down, then water, and send my servant."

So the Blackguard was busy, and

The Blackguard

cursing until long after the breakfast bugle; but the Colonel, refreshed by a wash and a hasty change into uniform, made his way to the table set under an awning for the officers' mess.

"Good-morning, gentlemen."

His kindly grey eyes had noted a civilian sitting with his two officers at breakfast, a handsome English youngster, neatly built but small, perhaps twenty years old, to judge by the light down of an incipient moustache; unused to the world, as might be known from the awkward self-consciousness of manners; very green, to judge by the ridiculous bourgeois attempt at a riding costume.

The two Inspectors had risen, big Fraser Gaye, late of Carrington's Horse in South Africa, and little Gunby, from the Kingston Military School.

"Good hunting, sir?" asked the one, but the other was kicking the Englishman furtively to make him stand up. "Good-morning, sir;" he was kicking strenuously, his face reddened with the exertion,—“let me present Mr. Ramsay.”

"You're welcome, Mr. Ramsay. Glad to see you ;—sit down."

The Blackguard

The Colonel had taken a chair at the head of the table, observant of Mr. Ramsay, and smiling with inward laughter. "Why," he wondered, "must a green youngster try to hide his ignorance with a cloak of affectation? He's speechless still with a sort of stage fright, so he pretends a lofty reserved indifference." "No," the Colonel turned suddenly upon Fraser Gaye, talking to give his guest a chance of cooling off, "the hunting was not very good. June is a bad month when one has to respect the game laws. Do you know what game is always in season, Mr. Ramsay?"

The Colonel's winning smile meant, as his subalterns knew, the advent of his very oldest joke. "No?" for Mr. Ramsay was still speechless. "Ah, the kind of sport I speak of is out of date where you come from. Man is the one game animal never out of season in the West."

"Man?" Mr. Ramsay had found his tongue at last; so while the Mess Orderly was laying breakfast before him, the Colonel went on reassured—

"Yes. My Division has been sent

The Blackguard

across the Rockies here into British Columbia because the Kootenay tribes have been a little restive. There was a medicine man from somewhere in Idaho at the bottom of all the trouble, and he being an American subject, I was not willing to risk the loquacity of the newspapers yonder. To arrest him meant worry and red tape without end."

"What, sir?" the senior Subaltern spoke anxiously. "Have you"—

"No," the Colonel smiled over his coffee cup, "I went as a civilian; as a civilian I herded him like a steer across the Tobacco Plains, and left him in gaol under a bogus charge in United States territory. That's my hunting, gentlemen."

The Colonel had given his guest time enough to shake off any embarrassment; indeed, the youngster had by this time helped himself uninvited to a second rasher of bacon, put on an air of assured worldliness, and was evidently trying to assume the easy devil-may-care freedom of manners which he supposed to be characteristic of the Far West.

"A little more bacon?" said the Colonel

The Blackguard

gracefully, with a wink towards his senior Inspector.

"Oh—ah—thanks—yes—I mean I've helped myself." The Tenderfoot was blushing to the roots of his hair.

"I hope my young gentlemen have been entertaining you properly?" continued the Colonel, at which the junior Inspector burst out laughing.

"We've tried, sir." Mr. Fraser Gaye met an inquiring glance from the Colonel. "We gave this gentleman your tent, with some of our bedding; but when he tried to turn in last night he fell foul of one of the Quartermaster's sheep lashed to the cot. Mr. Ramsay says he was kicked half-way across the parade ground."

"I must say," the Colonel tried to be grave, "I had some misgivings when I met La Mancha just now. He wore that eager-child innocence of expression which always means some fresh outrage. I promise you, Mr. Ramsay, that he shall have occasion to repent."

"Aw—I wouldn't be hard on him, don't you know. I'm sure it was only"—

The Englishman was genuine now, so that despite his airs and graces the Colonel

The Blackguard

liked him. Even the mess waiter, standing with a wooden face behind, allowed a glance to escape of intelligent appreciation, and the senior Inspector, noting it, was glad that news of this plea for mercy would reach the troop.

The Colonel changed the subject. "Well, Mr. Ramsay, how do you like our mountains?"

Again the Tenderfoot fell into needless embarrassment, until little Gunby came to his relief.

"Mr. Ramsay turned up last night, sir, on horseback." The Subaltern could not refrain from grinning at the remembrance. "He's got business up at the Throne Camp, so I took the liberty of promising"—

"A man to show him the way, eh? Quite right. Mr. Ramsay is welcome. Who's Orderly Officer? Oh! Then Mr. Fraser Gaye will detail a good man—and now"—

The Colonel rose, seeming scarcely to have taken more than a cup of coffee, and with a glance drew the senior Subaltern to his own tent, where he received a full report of events during his late absence.

The Blackguard

"Get rid of that young fool," was his last instruction before closing the interview. "If you let him stay in camp another day I shall have to punish half the men for practical jokes. Get rid of him before noon."

"Come to your mother, my love,
Come to your mother, my boy."

Defaulters' Call.

"Regimental Number 1107, Constable la Mancha," the Colonel read from a sheet of blue foolscap, "you are charged with having, on the night of the 2nd instant, been drunk."

The Blackguard nodded.

"You are further charged with having, on the same instant, acted contrary to the discipline of the Force, in that you did cruelly ill-treat an animal—namely, a sheep."

The Blackguard nodded.

"You are further charged with having used insulting and abusive language to the Sergeant of the Guard."

The Blackguard smiled. "I told him to"—

"Silence!" said the Sergeant-Major quietly.

The Blackguard

The Colonel laid down the charge-sheet with a gesture of weariness.

"Have you anything to say for yourself?"

"It's all correct, sir."

"You have no excuse or apology?"

"None, sir."

"Constable la Mancha, are you aware that your defaulter sheet is notoriously the blackest in the Force?"

The Blackguard answered with a smile of innocent frankness which would have disarmed a grizzly bear.

"In four months from now your time expires, otherwise, for continuous misbehaviour, I should be compelled to recommend your discharge. I cannot have my whole division demoralised by one"—he was going to say "blackguard!"—"Consider this matter. Fined one month's pay."

The Blackguard saluted.

"Thank you, sir."

"Right about turn," said the Sergeant-Major, "quick march."

Then the Colonel chuckled. Presently he looked up at the senior Inspector.

"Have you seen to Mr. Ramsay?"

The Blackguard

"I'm afraid, sir, that I have only one duty man available who knows the trail."

"You mean La Mancha? Hum!—I wish we had a dozen men as useful. Well, never mind the rules—he's safer occupied."

The Inspector spoke to the Orderly Sergeant, who left the tent saluting.

"Blackguard," he said, overtaking the culprit, "got a job for you. Saddle your horse and Polly. You're to take that Tenderfoot up to the Throne Mine. Report before lights out to-morrow, and see you don't 'mislaid him' anywhere."

CHAPTER IV

AN hour later, when the sun was high in the heavens, Mr. Ramsay, attended by a "common soldier," set out in state westward for the Selkirk Mountains. The Englishman's feelings were mixed, firstly with admiration for the common soldier's ease in the saddle, for his coal-black charger, standing sixteen hands, clumsy as a dray-horse, the one weight-carrying animal in D Division, for the belt weighed down at one side with a ponderous service revolver, and glittering all across his back with twenty cartridges of burnished brass like a serpent of golden fire. His second feeling was pride at being sent out with such an escort, for the Blackguard on horseback was magnificent. His third feeling was poignant humiliation over what had passed when, in presence of a dozen grinning troopers, he had tried to

The Blackguard

mount the gentle brown mare at the lines.

"If you will mount on the off side," was La Mancha's stinging comment, "she'll kick off your head to begin with."

Then somebody had made a remark about his riding-breeches, which came from the most expensive tailor in London. "Why, you idiot, they're for swimming. Don't you see the baggy parts blow like footballs to keep the duffer afloat?" He had not caught some further remarks about his leggings, but a chill went up his back at the thought of it. All across the continent he had looked in vain for such baggy riding-breeches, such leather leggings, such loud-checked tweed as his tailor had insisted upon in Conduit Street. Such things were not worn in Canada.

But now, away from the atmosphere of that camp, in which he had scarcely dared to breathe, away from the troopers who had looked upon him as a sort of penny toy, and the officers who had failed to see how much he needed rest after yesterday's ride, Mr. Ramsay felt that he must shake off his diffidence.

The Blackguard

They had reached the river, and, as the Blackguard slacked rein in mid-stream to let the big horse drink, Mr. Ramsay did the same, not observing that he had halted his animal so far forward that the water went down muddy and foul for the other. The Blackguard favoured him with a glance of some virulence, and went on a little. On the far bank there was more humiliation—dismounting to resinck the saddles after the western custom, the shortening of his own stirrup leathers, then the mounting, this time a little better done.

"Blackguard," said Mr. Ramsay, meaning to be distantly affable, as became their social relations; but the soldier looked round to favour him with a prolonged stare. Then, drawing a deep breath—

"If you want to call me, don't trouble to speak, just whistle—so"—

At the whistle a dog came leaping out from some bushes by the river. "Why, it's Powder! Come along, then, dear old chap!"

So for some time, while they paced slowly over the meadows and climbed the

The Blackguard

high bench beyond, the common soldier and the dog made perfect company, while the Tenderfoot rode behind full of bitterness.

"My good man," he said at last, irritably, drawing abreast, "the day before yesterday I left Windermere on horseback—I'd never been on the back of a horse in all my life."

"So I see," said the Blackguard, glancing over the other with scorching criticism.

"I was frightened to death, but whatever you think of me I can keep my cowardice to myself."

"So I observe. Sure sign of a thoroughbred!" said the Blackguard gravely. "Now, if you pick up Powder by the tail, he won't let out a whimper."

Mr. Ramsay looked at the animal, which was piebald red and white like a cow, exhibited in its person symptoms of about eighteen different kinds of dog, and had not the slightest vestige of a tail, not even a bud. The Tenderfoot tried to be freezingly polite.

"Fit for the Dogs' Home, I should think."

The Blackguard

"No," said the Blackguard, "he's very rare—thoroughbred of his kind—the only known specimen. He's getting sick of this expedition already. Go you home, Powder!"

Powder, assuming an expression of disdain, hopped off languidly on three legs.

"He's official dog to D Troop," explained the Blackguard; "draws his rations out of the hindquarters of every civilian dog within ten miles."

Mr. Ramsay took a case from his pocket, and with much gravity and puppyish affectation drew out a cigar, which, with vigorous balancing in the saddle, he managed to light, throwing the flaming match beside the trail.

The Blackguard, greatly amused, pulled up, dismounted, quenched an incipient fire with his foot, then, swinging easily into the saddle, remarked upon certain penalties for setting the country alight.

Mr. Ramsay maintained a scornful silence. Neither this, nor the distant affability, nor the freezing politeness had been quite a success, but there was still a trace of condescension in his voice when he remarked experimentally upon the

The Blackguard

shot-gun slung in place of a carbine on the horn of La Mancha's saddle.

"Ah, my good fellow, what kind of shooting do you expect?"

"Side-hill hens," the Blackguard waxed serious.

"What are they? We have none at home."

"Oh, in this mountain country the prairie chickens have one leg shorter than the other, so that they can graze along the slopes."

"But then, they could only go one way! It sounds like nonsense."

"Quite true, though; they keep to the right. I'll show you their notice-boards presently. Then higher up we may get a few chiffons, or a brace of fichus."

"I never heard of your local game. Very inferior sport, I should suppose."

"Yes. The chiffon is only a four-legged bird—grows fur and teeth."

"Of course, you mean it's an animal?"

"No—plain bird. And the fichu is more curious still. We only get hen birds now, because the cock birds are all extinct."

"Aw—nonsense! How could they breed?"

The Blackguard

"They don't," said the Blackguard sorrowfully.

By this time Mr. Ramsay was full of misgivings, but gaining the top of the bench-land, the Blackguard led off at a trot which soon shook not only misgivings out of the Tenderfoot, but also several vital organs, and even one or two distinctly profane remarks when he lost the cigar. He was so sore after yesterday's travelling that every jerk spelt agony, and nothing but courage withheld him from crying aloud.

"Sore tail, eh?" said La Mancha at last, and, loosing rein, let his horse break into a fresh pace, the delightfully easy canter known in the west as a "lope."
"Is that better?"

"Haw! I could keep this up all day. You need not consider me."

So they went on across the gently rolling grass land, past many a graceful thorp of pines and bluff of tremulous aspen, through meadow lands ablaze with big yellow daisies and swaying acres bright with golden rod. The air was rich with perfume from the woods, where unseen birds rang out ecstatic songs; canaries

The Blackguard

flaunted their gorgeous hues from branch to branch, and humming-birds whirring each like an emerald in his mist of wings over the blossoms of rich scented briar. Great gardens of wild roses mile by mile, steeped with intoxicating perfume, then cedars towering out of the dreamy heat, then of a sudden they entered a green twilight of forest, cool, still, mysterious, like some ghostly sea where coral red along the misty aisles great trees went up into a cloud of leaves. So the Blackguard drew rein as though it were irreverent to canter into church, and mile after mile the trail went upward into the shadow, steeper and steeper as they neared the hills.

Suddenly the green gloaming parted ahead, framing the blue haze of an abrupt mountain; then, as though out of some submarine cavern, the riders came into an open glade at the very base of the Selkirk range, where the afternoon sun half-blinded them. On either hand steep wooded heights shot up into mid-sky—between them a winding meadow barred just ahead with a great snake fence, save where there came forth a rumbling stream,

The Blackguard

milk-white because it had sprung full-grown from the mills of the gods—from the far-away glacier of the Throne.

The Blackguard let out a long "halloo," answered at once by a rifle shot; and the Tenderfoot was just in time to see a whiff of blue smoke against the big snake fence.

"Two cowboys in camp," explained the Blackguard as they rode forward; "they've made the fence to corral old General Buster's bulls."

"Aw—a pretty rough lot, I suppose."

"Be civil, or they'll eat you," the Blackguard grinned; "they always shoot at sight unless you halloo their password. That's why I yelped. They're cannibals too. Have you much money on you? Well, it's too late to save it now—so hope for the best."

Thus prejudiced against the cowboys, Mr. Ramsay found their appearance displeasing. Both men wore blue shirts with large pearl buttons arranged in a shield pattern on the breast, and heavy leather "chaparejos" leggings, suspended from a revolver belt; one pair with leather fringes all down the outer seam, the other

The Blackguard

completely faced with the hairy black bearskin. Black Bear was a swarthy Mexican, ominously scowling, and adorned with large gold earrings; Leather, who answered to the uncouth name Arrapahoe Bill, was a lengthy hard fair sinner, whose tawny hair curled down well over his neck.

"Ho-la, the Blackguard!" was Black Bear's greeting, followed by a torrent in guttural Spanish, while the horses were being rapidly unsaddled and turned loose to graze within the fence. As to Arrapahoe Bill, one glance at the Tenderfoot's baggy breeches reduced him to ominous silence.

"Well, Bill—how's tricks?" said the Blackguard afterwards, lying at ease before the tent, while he watched the Mexican's cookery of coffee and venison.

"Tricks?" growled Arrapahoe Bill, pointing at Mr. Ramsay,— "where did you get *that*?"

"Oh, let me introduce you,—this is Mr. Ramsay from—Clapham Junction."

"How do?" said the cowboy stiffly.

"Come, Bill," the Blackguard seemed amused, "a cheerful specimen you are,

The Blackguard

you confounded old grizzly. Wake up and be civil."

"Mistah Ramsay from Clapham Junction," said the cowboy with difficulty, as though his tongue was stiff, "there ain't no civility whar I come from, but white men are always welcome, sah, among gentlemen."

"I am not, as you suppose, from Clapham Junction," said the Tenderfoot, thinking thus to mitigate the situation, "but—thanks all the same," he added lamely.

"Mistah Ramsay," continued the Blackguard, with a malicious grin, "is an English capitalist going up to see the Throne Mine."

"Huh!" the Mexican chuckled with a snarling laugh, "the outfit of the Throne Mine is gone *loco*."

"That means," explained La Mancha, "that the people at the Throne are lunatics."

"Really?"

"All yesterday they fire off guns—they have a *fiesta*." Then followed another torrent of guttural Spanish.

"A birthday party," explained La

The Blackguard

Mancha. "'Ware petticoats! It seems that they've got a woman up there—the Burrows girl, they call her; arrived since I was this way before."

"Perhaps," suggested the Tenderfoot stiffly, "Mr. Burrows has a niece or a daughter."

"Anyway, she's a good-looking piece, by all accounts. Wish I'd been up there for the birthday,—I like girls."

"Come, Mr. Tenderfoot." Arrapahoe Bill was cleaning his sheath knife by stabbing it into the earth. "Soldier, the kettle's a-boil. Sling in that coffee."

The soldier slung coffee and sugar into the camp kettle, let it boil a minute, then served the scalding stuff into four tin cups. Meanwhile Black Bear was busy filling four tin plates with a stew of reindeer. So the meal commenced, for three ravenous frontiersmen and one doubtful Britisher who had never before tasted venison, nor knew what manner of beast had furnished it.

"More girl deer," said the Black Bear in his dubious English.

"More what?" The Tenderfoot cast a glance of extreme suspicion at the stew.

The Blackguard

"Dear girl, he means," explained the Blackguard,— "dear little Indian girl shot yesterday."

The Englishman, ghastly white, got up, clutching his breast with both hands, and walked away with great dignity into the woods.

"Ware rattlesnakes!" shouted Arrapahoe Bill, with a grim chuckle; and then, knowing that the victim of this awful jest was beyond all fear of snakes, the three men laughed. Yet even while the Blackguard relished the flavour of the joke came its bitter aftertaste, which froze the grin on his face and made him follow Mr. Ramsay.

"Look here," he said, coming to where his charge leaned shaking against a tree, "don't be a fool! That dish, my Emerald, was venison, the meat of the cariboo, of the reindeer. You know what venison is?"

The Englishman turned slowly, looking over his shoulder with a glance of scorn and rage. "I know what you are," he said in a low even voice,— "I know what you are now."

"A blackguard, yes, I know. And

D

The Blackguard

yet—and yet—you needn't make such a fuss about it."

The Englishman turned full upon him, quite quiet, though the sweat stood upon his forehead in white drops. "I am a Tenderfoot—you laugh at me—think I'm afraid of you. I don't know your ways here, but I've read of them in books. There is one thing in common between us two. Will you fight?"

"No,—you're too small."

"I don't mean with fists. Go and borrow for me a revolver from those friends of yours—you have your own."

"You're a brave man," said the Blackguard, bantering, "but you see, my dear fellow, I can't fight, because my business is to keep you out of mischief."

"You needn't try to shuffle out of it now—fetch that revolver."

"Little stranger, I am a dead shot, I have killed men—worse luck—before now; while you never fired a gun in all your life."

"I choose your own weapons, you coward!"

"Little man, over all this country, from sea to sea, there's a flag"—the

The Blackguard

Blackguard took off his hat—"which does not allow any nonsense. We're not in the United States just now. I beg your pardon, I, Don José Santa Maria Sebastian Iago las Morėnas de la Mancha, otherwise known as the Blackguard, beg your pardon. Come, don't be a silly ass!"

It was not what La Mancha said, nor the grace with which he spoke, the certain scornful simplicity as of a great aristocrat, which moved the Englishman. Rather it was the wonderful tender light in the man's eyes.

Ramsay's hand went out instinctively, and the two men were friends.

CHAPTER V

"Do you know my side of life—London?" asked the Tenderfoot haughtily, as he followed La Mancha by a corkscrew trail up the lower foothills.

"Rather," said the Blackguard,— "the mare's a great pal of mine."

"The *Lord* Mayor, I suppose, you mean?"

"No, the grey mare—horse's old woman, you know. Besides, I know the place well. The Grand Trunk passes through it; there's quite a station."

"Why, hundreds of lines go to London."

"Well, I don't know about hundreds. There's the Grand Trunk, and perhaps they carry a line of portmanteaux or hat-boxes. But I always take the Grand Trunk. More commodious. Besides, one has to have a lot of clothes for a big

The Blackguard

place like London; it has ten thousand people."

"Five millions, you mean."

"Oh, come off; there are not that number in the whole of Ontario, or Canada, for that matter."

"London, Ontario? But I was talking of the real London."

"I see; another place, I suppose, of the same name—called after it, most likely. Oh yes, I know, of course."

The Tenderfoot raged furiously.

"All right, keep on your shirt," said the Blackguard; "I'll be quite serious if you like. Yes, I know Town—lots of relations there."

"What name?" asked the Tenderfoot innocently. "Where do they live?"

"All over the place—different branches of the family, you know, but you can always tell them by their coat-of-arms—the Medici arms, three golden globes and a side door. They're mostly uncles."

In spite of himself, Mr. Ramsay laughed. "I know them. What made you say I came from Clapham Junction?"

"Where do you live, then?"

"Balham."

The Blackguard

"I was only two miles wrong, my friend ; it's written on you."

"Written on me?"

"Yes, it will rub off in time, that brand of the respectable suburbs. Good old southern suburbs!"

"I don't see what you mean, but you know your London."

"Yes, Tenderfoot, but not *your* London. Mine was the jolly old London of dress rehearsals, actors' dressing-rooms, suppers at Salviati's, a brake for the Derby, Tattersall's, Lord's, Sunday at Richmond, Monday with the Vagabonds, at the House, in the Night Club, in the Row, in Mayfair, in Whitechapel, on the River, in the Bucket Shop, up the Spout, or the deuce knows where."

"I never saw that London," said the Tenderfoot gravely.

"What was your London, then?"

"Oh, the City, the City all day, and for my sins Exeter Hall, because my father's that sort of man ; and in the evenings, parlour games, lawn tennis, parties,—my mother's that kind of woman ; lecturing on minerals at the Polytechnics, debating at the mock Parliament, slumming

The Blackguard

in Southwark. Lord, how sick I was or it all—oh, how sick and tired! But now these woods, this life, if I could only understand,—meeting men, real men like you, with bodies instead of only souls.”

“Poor little beggar! Yet I suppose there were things you liked even in your London?”

“Yes, cycling, boating, the debates, the lecturing, thinking, reading, finding out things. After all, it’s a wonderful place, the centre of everything, the middle of the whole world.”

“Give me the outside edge,” said the Blackguard, “the jumping-off place where you look out into the dark occasionally, and catch a glimpse of heaven or hell through the window.”

“That sounds like poetry.”

“And it feels like life. I’ve never read a book, but I’ve lived—you bet, I’ve lived! Great gods, it’s better than books; it’s better than London, as you’ll see when you get to live. You don’t understand things yet. You don’t know what it is to be in danger, to feel your heart jump with excitement, to feel your blood dance at the order to fire, to kill men, to be

The Blackguard

shot at. I used to like a bull feast once in Spain, but that's tame ; to fight in our insurrections—that was better. Even a dead nation must have a little fun, and so, because we're not strong enough to fight our neighbours, we have comical insurrections among ourselves. We are quite bloodthirsty, and some people really get hurt. But there's not even that these last few years. Poor old Spain ! Once she was mistress of the earth, once we Spaniards lived for war and wine and love, and had it all until we were satisfied. Now there are one or two live Spaniards like me, but to live as our fathers lived we have to serve under another flag.

“ When you wake up, when you've forgotten all about that infernal old Balham, you'll see that there's another London, the centre of the Empire, which has stolen the fire from heaven that once belonged to Spain. We're making that Empire, we cowboys and miners, magistrates and mounted police of the frontier, —making the new empire in Australia, in Canada, in Africa, in India. That's what it means, the frontier which you've been

The Blackguard

trying, after your little Balham way, to live in these last few days." Then the Blackguard relapsed into a shamefaced chuckle. "By Jove, I didn't think I had it in me. I'm going to preach to the boys when I get back to camp. I'll make 'em sit up, and if they laugh I'll punch their heads till they're sick."

The hillside was clothed beneath the pines with a dense wet jungle of rotting deadfall, fruit bushes gorgeous with blossom, and the immense leaves poised on viciously barbed stems of the devil-club. After climbing for a very long time, the riders came to the brow of this lowest spur of the mountains, from whence the trail wound on through big timber for many a weary mile, gently rising save where there was an occasional abrupt slope to be surmounted. The top of the ridge was a gigantic stairway, and it was sundown before the Tenderfoot and his guide came to the base of the upper foothills.

"I say," said the Tenderfoot, as they breathed their horses before breasting the zig-zag trail up this mountain,—“I've been too much ashamed to say anything,

The Blackguard

but will these people at the Throne mind my coming without any luggage?"

"They won't mind, if you don't."

"I set off from Windermere driving a pack-horse in front of me."

"I see, and the horse went back to Windermere? They'll send it along with the mail or our next patrol. I'll tell Grab-a-root, the Quartermaster."

"I say, you've rum names in this country—Grab-a-root, Dandy, Mutiny, Tribulation, Arrapahoe Bill, The Blackguard. Does everybody have a nickname?"

"No; only men who are pretty well liked—or hated."

"Have I one?"

"Oh, you're only a Tenderfoot,—you don't count."

The youngster sighed. "They called me Charlie at home; but here—I see now."

"Poor old Charlie!"

"And Mr. Burrows up yonder?"

"The Lunatic, eh? We must be getting on."

"Is it very far?" the lad sighed pitifully.

The Blackguard

"A mile or two. Come on."

The big timber insensibly gave place to pines scattering up the slope of everlessening girth and stature, sharp, slender cones, black like funeral torches. It seemed ten weary miles to the top of this upper foothill. The summit was a desolate moor, streaked with snow in its hollows, stony, with patches of grassy swamp and scattered torches twisted in uncouth torture, very small, yet looming monstrous against the waning light. Ahead was a stony ridge speckled with juniper bushes, and on its brow two spots like jutting rocks.

"Look," said the Blackguard, pointing to a tiny glimmer under one of these spots; "they're lighting their lamp at the Throne."

CHAPTER VI

THE Burrows girl was sitting on a soap box outside the Throne cabin. Supper was over, the dishes were just washed up, her uncle sat within reading a book of mathematics, so the Burrows girl could enjoy the cool solitude of the hills watching the afterglow. She knew she was ruddy, sunburned, and freckled; she also knew that the effect was rather becoming, that week by week her dainty beauty was budding steadily with considerable prospect of real loveliness,—all of which gave very good cause for contentment. As yet man had not appeared in her paradise, because so far a month's observation had convinced her that none of the neighbouring prospectors were sufficiently young to count. At school she had been three times in love with men seen distantly in church or street,

The Blackguard

but these had all gone blindly by, and were probably fools. Now, according to all her text-books, which were mostly novels, to every maid there comes in time a man. This man takes himself seriously as a lord of creation, but is really not at all so formidable as he looks, being a vulnerable creature, prone to make an ass of himself on the smallest provocation from a woman. The greater the lord of creation, the more abject his enslavement, the more complete the conquest. There was one story about a young lady, called Una, leading a growling lion around with a string.

"I want my lion to be very growly indeed," said the Burrows girl to the stars; whereat the stars, seeing two young men toiling painfully up the trail, began to wink.

"Why," said the Burrows girl, "there's something moving yonder. Two men, I declare, on horseback, coming up to the cabin. Uncle!" she called,—“Uncle!”

"Well, my dear?" An elderly man in a velveteen jacket came lounging to the door and stood against the lamplight.

"Visitors, Uncle! Oh, bother!" con-

The Blackguard

tinued the Burrows girl fretfully ; " they'll be wanting supper."

"The duties of hospitality," said the man sententiously, " must"—

" Oh, drat the duties ! You never have to wash up." Then, to appease him :

"I don't want any company, Uncle—except you. I wonder who are they? Not prospectors, anyway. The big one looks like a soldier."

" Mounted police."

"And the little one?" she spoke under her breath. "'In this style three and sixpence,'—I've seen lots like him; but the big one is 'positively thrown away at a guinea.'"

"Good evening, gentlemen."

"Same to you," said the big man, reining up close before the cabin. "I had orders to deliver this package with the talking end up."

"Mr. Burrows, I think," said the little man, drawing nearer. "My name's Ramsay, and my father asked me to deliver this letter of introduction."

"What ! From Augustus Ramsay & Co. ? This is indeed fortunate. Welcome ; most heartily welcome, Mr.

The Blackguard

Ramsay. Let me present to you my niece, Miss Violet."

For some minutes the Blackguard sat his horse impatient, holding Ramsay's rein while compliments flew thick—Balham compliments, bourgeois civilities. He was the "common soldier" once more, Ramsay's soldier-servant from the Burrows' point of view. Then the girl came to him, rather ashamed, he thought, asked him to "get down," hoped he was not very tired, led him off to a shed which served for a stable, showed him the water-hole, the oats, the lantern, the compressed hay, and finally ran off to light up her kitchen stove for a second supper.

"She's almost a lady," thought the Blackguard, while he groomed and watered and fed the exhausted horses.

Within the cabin Mr. Burrows was holding forth while his niece laid the table. From his talk one would have supposed that he spoke from some rostrum, possibly from a throne.

"Look at me," he said majestically,—
"do I look like a fool?"

The Tenderfoot blushed.

The Blackguard

"Answer this. Does my appearance suggest insanity?"

The Tenderfoot went on blushing.

"These ignorant prospectors have given forth to the whole neighbourhood that because my methods of mining differ from theirs, I am nothing better than a lunatic."

"I should think that you would treat them with silent contempt."

"I do, young man,—I do treat them with silent contempt. Why, only the other day I asked one of them what he meant by—; but, pshaw, I can afford to overlook what they mean. After all, these prospectors only reflect the greater world outside, which ever has resented improvements, and looked upon the inventor as a public enemy. It was thus with Galileo, Watt, Stephenson, Faraday—contempt, disparagement, starvation, while they lived; then, when they died of want, a commemorative statue. For my part, I desire no statue which commemorates rather the littleness of the living than the greatness of the dead. I overlook such small considerations; they are beneath my notice. What did you

The Blackguard

say, Violet? Supper? Ah!—a second supper. This mountain air has the advantage of being conducive to a second supper. I entirely approve of mountain air. Draw up, young man, to the table.”

So they began to eat bacon and beans, the Lunatic discoursing monotonously, the Tenderfoot exchanging first flirtation signals with the Burrows girl, as she waited on them, while the Blackguard just outside splashed cumbrously over a tin basin and a model brickbat of scrubbing soap.

“Ah!” Mr. Burrows sighed over his second helping, which left seemingly but a scanty remainder for the big hungry man outside. “These considerations of diet, my young friend,”—and so on.

With a last wrench at the roller towel, which he had puffed over and blown into with great satisfaction, the Blackguard rolled down the sleeves of his grey undershirt, wished inwardly that he had brought a jacket, since he was to be the guest of a woman, and strode with loud-clanking spurs across the doorstep.

“Ah, Constable,” said Lunatic Burrows indifferently, “I had forgotten. I hope

The Blackguard

Miss Burrows has reserved some supper for you in the kitchen."

The Blackguard's face looked black and threatening as he drew up his shoulders, his head almost touching the beams. "I only came in," he said haughtily, "to tell this youngster not to trouble about the horses—I've seen to them."

"I've kept your supper in the oven," said Miss Burrows anxiously. "You'll forgive us for beginning without you?"

La Mancha bowed stiffly, but his eyes were tender at once when he saw the girl's real courtesy.

"I hope you'll excuse me, Miss Burrows. Fact is, I have friends at the Tough Nut Claim who want me to stay over night." Then he turned to her Uncle: "You needn't disturb yourself, Burrows."

"Oh yes—certainly—very proper, I'm sure. Your friends at the Tough Nut will"—

"For shame, Uncle," cried the girl indignantly; and the Tenderfoot stood up.

"I hope you'll excuse me too, Mr.

The Blackguard

Burrows, if I say good-night. I'm going with my friend."

Mr. Burrows turned to him in speechless astonishment, but the Blackguard came at once to the rescue. "Sit down again, youngster," he said gently; "we'll make a man of you yet. Good-night, Miss Burrows; good-night, youngster; so-long, Burrows,—see you again in the morning."

Then he turned on his heel and walked out.

"I think it's too bad," said the girl; "I never felt so shamed in all my life."

"Ah, well, you see," drawled Lunatic Burrows, with a sigh of relief. "A few more beans, Mr. Ramsay—just a few more."

"Who is he?" asked the girl.

"Why, that's Mr. La Mancha."

"La Mancha—is that the Blackguard?" Miss Burrows went to the door, looking out into the clear starlight on the hills. "I've heard of him. They say he's a tremendous swell. What a splendid man!"

"A swell?" drawled Mr. Burrows, awakening as though from some dream.

The Blackguard

"Dear, dear, you really ought to have warned me. It's all your fault, Violet. How was I to know? Run after him—bring him back at once."

Miss Violet turned her back on him, and went off to the kitchen.

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Violet.
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on him,

CHAPTER VII

JUST behind the Burrows' cabin the ground fell away with startling abruptness. There were just two or three juniper bushes and a patch of dirty snow, then the rough edge—then space. One looked down almost terrified into a blue mist; and full three thousand feet below were the tops of big pine trees in another climate—almost in another world. Opposite there rose another granite precipice, smooth, grey, gigantic, the valley between reaching away on the right, round a bend, to the meadow where Arrapahoe Bill and Black Bear guarded their bulls.

On the left was the head of the gorge, with its glacier breaking over a cliff, and the broken river, roaring down the wall, fell into a lake deep blue as the very sky. This was the Throne glacier, the seat of

The Blackguard

what seemed like a chair, with the lake at its feet, the enormous cliffs on either side for arms, the back an Alp, ice-clad, but splintering upward into needle spires, now touched with the roseate glow of sunrise.

All along the westward sky glimmered the awakening summits of the Selkirks; eastwards, across the Kootenay trench, the Rocky Mountains hung like a belt of azure mist against the sunrise; but La Mancha, sitting on the verge of that huge precipice behind the cabins, took no thought of the day or of the morrow. A little wreath of smoke rose straight up from his pipe into the thin air, and the awful magnificence of the Alps had no existence for him while he thought of a woman. Her face was before him in a dream—the face of a sweet maid, bright with impudence, a wholesome nut-brown maiden innocent. Her innocence made the Blackguard want to protect her; the frank brown eyes made him desirous of study, that in their depths he might see what it was to be good. The Blackguard had tasted all the joys of life, save this one thing—purity. The aftertaste

The Blackguard

of pleasure was sour upon his lips, but happiness seemed yet ever so far away. "If I were only good," he said to his pipe, "but I'm not; wherefore she would find me out, then hate me." So he sat at the edge of the cliff, perched like a fly on a wall, until presently there came another fly stealing up softly behind; a female fly this, full as her little body could hold of wanton mischief, to wit, the Burrows girl, who clapped her dainty hands over both La Mancha's eyes.

"You must be Love," laughed the Blackguard, "blinding a chap like that. What nice soft fingers—Um! Get away, you minx, or I'll kiss you."

"Ugh!" said the minx, suddenly releasing him.

"Now, sit down here, Impudence, and tell me who taught you your manners."

"I couldn't help it," she said in justification.

"My Uncle is talking that poor boy to death in the cabin. Oh! so grave, so solemn; I wanted to scream; I got desperate! So I came out."

"Sit down, Impudence."

Impudence sat down a yard off, blush-

The Blackguard

ing hotly, her childlike face full of reproach that she had been led astray from last night's fine ideals. So this was the way she was playing the part of a grown woman. Pretty chance there was if she behaved as a schoolgirl of being Una with a growly lion in tow!

"Miss Burrows," said the Blackguard, "ain't you ashamed of yourself? You've interrupted the most serious thoughts, you've rumped my hair, you've put out my pipe, you've damaged my complexion. Nice sort of girl you are!"

She looked at his wicked bronzed face—his complexion, indeed! Then she laughed, not knowing that every note of her happiness went through the man like an arrow.

"Do you know, young lady, that I'm dangerous, that I'm a bad lot, that your mother, if you have one, would be afraid to see you sitting near me, eh?"

"You needn't be conceited about it, anyway."

It was evidently no use trying to warn her—she did not believe in evil, this sweet maid, but trusted herself in his bad company—ay, and trusted him.

The Blackguard

Clever women had played with him—had played with fire, but the wise ladies had been badly burned. Her defenceless littleness was not like their strong towers. They incited to attack, she to defence. "Little woman," he said, "it's time for me to be going."

"Oh, but the sun's only just up, and I must make amends for my Uncle's manners. I am going to make him apologise to you—I am indeed. He shall go down on his bended knees. You must stay for dinner."

"But if I am not back in camp by noon I shall be put under arrest, then awful things will happen."

"What kind of things?"

"They'll clip my ears like a dog, they'll chain me up, and give me bones to gnaw. It isn't as if I had a good character. A man with a good character can get drunk whenever he likes, smash things, punch people's heads, have a good time; but me—I'm the Blackguard, so if I look cross ways at the Colonel's tent it's mutiny."

"Ha, ha!—how I'd like to see you gnawing bones!"

The Blackguard

"I'll kiss you unless you're civil."

"You daren't!"

"Eh?" The Blackguard sprang up as she fled like the wind before him along the edge of the cliff; but then she turned, laughing over her shoulder—the little flirt, at which he drew himself up, saluting as though she were the Queen. "I forgot," said the Blackguard regretfully.

"What?" asked the girl in fearless innocence.

"Why, that my horse is whinnying for me. He just loves to be saddled up and ridden all day. Come, make friends with the Devil while I saddle him."

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CHAPTER VIII

THE Tenderfoot must see the Blackguard a mile or so on his way, but La Mancha took him by a new route which sloped down quickly into the timber. The boy's heart beat high because the Blackguard treated him now as an equal, almost as a chum, and this, which he would have disdained yesterday morning, seemed a great condescension today. In his heart of hearts Mr. Ramsay felt a new thing—a craving for the rough frontier life, for the romance of savagery. A real Britisher is never thoroughly civilised; inside the veneer of the university lurks the schoolboy barbarian, blessed with the hereditary instinct of clenched fists, which gives world-mastery to the Dominant Race, that blood-thirst of the Vikings, that chivalry of the Middle Ages, that headlong courage of the sea

The Blackguard

heroes who took to water in the great days of Elizabeth, that masterfulness which afterwards created the most glorious empire the world has ever seen. Britain is not in Fleet Street, or Mayfair, or the City, but at heart a rough race of conquerors and rulers. So this Tenderfoot from Balham, awakening in one short day, shook off the garments of conventionalism, worshipping the Blackguard because he was brave and strong, hung furtively a pace behind him as they walked, that he might gloat upon a pair of big rowelled spurs, a glittering cartridge belt, and a big sheathed revolver. That is the way of an English lad since the very beginning, and that must be the way until the time when we fall to rise no more.

"Why don't we ride?" he asked, for the Blackguard was leading both horses, tied head to tail.

"Because horses weren't built to carry a weight down hill. Their knees are weak."

Said the Tenderfoot fatuously, "But you're a Spaniard, they say."

"And what of that?"

"I thought Spaniards were always beastly cruel."

The Blackguard

Yesterday the Blackguard would have struck any man living for saying as much. Now he grinned.

"You're improving, Charlie. You'll be getting damaged presently for cheek. If I were all Spaniard I'd ride down here at a gallop. I'd ride over you to begin with, just to see the blood squirting. As it is, the Spanish end of me isn't over safe to fool with, though the English end of me rather fancies your confounded impudence."

"So you're half English?"

"My mother was English."

"Oh!"

Presently the Blackguard asked a question, watching narrowly what the effect would be. "I suppose, Charlie, you'll be flirting with Miss Burrows up yonder?"

The lad blushed hotly.

"I thought so, Charlie. Halt; look me square in the eyes, if you can. The Spanish end of me wanted to ride you down just now; it got jealous, but the English end of me thinks it only common decency to warn you. I may be flirting with that girl myself,—I suppose because I oughtn't to think of her on a regular month's fine of my pay and Government

The Blackguard

rations. You needn't look like a frost-bitten chipmunk,—the betting is ten to one on you, because you're a presentable candidate, and I'm not, worse luck. The betting is a hundred to one on you, because you've got the field all to yourself, you brat. Besides that, you're good-looking in a way, with those infernally frank blue eyes, while I look like the very devil. We've each got to take our chance, and when she makes her choice, the devil take the hindmost. You understand?"

"But it's not that way at all." Mr. Ramsay was blushing. "She's an awfully nice girl—but—fact is," he drew himself up, and added with slow magnificence, "I'm not a marrying man."

The Blackguard laughed. "Well, let's drop that and get down to the Tough Nut Claim before dinner-time. By the way, when you meet these prospectors, take care not to let them suspect why you came to this country, because, if they think you represent money in London, they'll make it a point of honour to sell you a wild-cat claim."

"Why did you bring me this way?"

"When that cad Burrows has talked

The Blackguard

you blind you'll need a friend or so to lead you about. Come on, we'll have dinner at the Claim."

Among the torchlike pines they came to a little log-cabin, with a door and window in front, shaded by an extension of the ridge roof, and at the back a chimney of sticks wattled over with clay. Just beyond, a cutting had been made into the hill, this being the entrance to a tunnel, the waste rock from which had been spread out into a terrace, or dump, littered with heaps of silver-bearing lead, all glittering in the sunlight. From within the tunnel came the steady clang of a sledge-hammer beating a bar of steel into live rock ; but the Blackguard tethered his horses to a stump, and the two men sat down in a rough smithy.

"What's this?" Mr. Ramsay sniffed disdainfully. "It looks like some blacksmith's shop."

"It is," said La Mancha, lighting his pipe. "They use it for sharpening the points of the drills. Look here, youngster, for fear of trouble when you meet these prospectors, I'm going to give you a dose of etiquette.

The Blackguard

"If you meet a westerner, call him 'my good man.'

"When you dine with him, criticise the food, ask how much there's to pay, and look on while he washes up.

"Always make him keep his distance, and, if he won't take the hint, talk about your big relations—your friend, the Duchess of Balham, and so forth.

"When you light your cigar, don't offer him one first.

"Afterwards, when you meet, give him your finger-tips to shake, or don't even notice him.

"Always"—

"Stop," cried the Tenderfoot, hot with rage and shame. "Do you think I'm such an awful cad as that?"

"You were yesterday, my buck, when you left camp.

"For instance, just now you set off to walk this way with me because you were too uneasy to say good-bye. You thought you ought to offer me a tip, but you didn't dare."

"Suppose I had?" asked the other sulkily.

"I'd have thrashed you to a jelly. I

The Blackguard

always over-exert myself when I lose my temper."

For a minute or so the Blackguard watched a gaily-striped squirrel, a "chipmunk," which was playing with some nut-shells by the forge. "Cheep," said La Mancha, with a queer click of the tongue.

"Cheep," responded the animal, still busy.

"Cheep," said La Mancha again, where-upon the dainty little beast sat on end, with furry tail coiled up its furry back, and looked from one to the other to see which spoke.

"Cheep," said La Mancha, at which the chipmunk glanced derisively at the Englishman's riding-breeches, then ran up the big man's boot and perched on his knee.

"How's the nut business, eh, little man?"

"Cheep, cheep," clicked the chipmunk; then, disdaining any further overtures of friendship, scuttled off to play again with his nut-shells.

Mr. Ramsay sat in high dudgeon, brooding over his wrongs, much to the Blackguard's amusement as he smoked

The Blackguard

peacefully until the prospectors should be ready to knock off work at the dinner-hour. The clang of the sledge-hammer had ceased, a willowy man in long boots and a muddy complexion crossed from the tunnel to the cabin, the dinner smoke began to float up from the chimney, from within the tunnel came a sound of tapping, then thumping, then silence.

"Tamping in the charges," muttered La Mancha; "there'll be blasting soon. Cheer up, Charlie; Long Leslie saw us when he went to the cabin, or he wouldn't have made a dinner fire on a hot day like this."

Mr. Ramsay disdained to answer, so La Mancha smoked peacefully, watching the chipmunk at play.

A second muddy man came running from the tunnel, dodging behind the ore bank, yelling "Look out!" A volley of stones came flying out after him; a dull explosion shook the hillside.

"All right?" called the second muddy man, now eagerly examining the fragments just thrown out. "I'll be with you, Blackguard, in a jiffy."

Mr. Ramsay had picked up a yellow

The Blackguard

object from the bench beside him, something which might have been a very big stick of barley sugar, yet felt rather like wax.

"Give that to me," said the Blackguard; then, seeing that the other resented his tone of command, he made a rapid grab at the stick.

Indignant because of the treatment he received at the hands of a man who had unconsciously flattered him into a feeling of equality and friendship, the Tenderfoot swung the yellow stick over his head with a rapid aim at the squirrel.

"Take care," said the Blackguard,—
"that's dynamite."

It was too late. The stick had already flown from the youngster's hand, was swirling across the smithy. Then a red flower seemed to bud in the air, which became a gigantic blossom growing—filling all the world, scorching hot.

The Blackguard opened one eye, then the other, lazily observant of the two prospectors, who were lifting away the ruins of their smithy.

"How's that Tenderfoot? Is he dead?"

The Blackguard

Shorty answered, with a gulp in his throat, "So, you're alive? That's good."

"But the Tenderfoot?"

"Oh, we got him out all right."

Shorty was wrenching at a small beam which lay across La Mancha's shoulder.

"No bones broken; but he hasn't woke up. Here, that takes the weight off you. How do you feel?"

"Middling," said the Blackguard, closing his eyes again. "Are the horses all right?"

"Only scared."

"Ride up, one of you; fetch the Burrows girl with some tintacks and the family gum-pot. Right arm broken above the elbow. Just like my confounded luck. They'll fine me another month's pay for — breaking — leave." And then he fainted.

The Blackguard groaned as he woke up. "Beg pardon, didn't mean to," he said; then opening his eyes, "Are you the Burrows girl, or a Christmas-card angel?"

Miss Violet's eyes were red as she bent over him, holding a half-empty flask.

The Blackguard

"If you're a woman," he said, "please kiss me."

She did.

"Thanks. You're a very nice girl. Do you know how to do what you're told?"

She nodded, trying to smile, which was difficult, because her lips would curl the wrong way. "Then," he said, "take two sticks of wood, cover them all over with cotton wool, bind it down even with bandages, then strap them on either side of my arm, while Shorty and Long Leslie pull the bones out straight. Understand?"

"I'm awfully frightened," whispered Miss Violet.

"Be frightened afterwards, not now. I always come to grief whenever I try to be good. I promise I won't ever do it again; but be quick, my dear, and while you're making the splints get somebody to pour cold water on the swelling."

"How's that silly ass?" he asked tenderly, while the work went forward; and it was the Tenderfoot who answered tearfully, "The silly ass is ashamed."

CHAPTER IX

"SIR,—I have the honour to inform you that Mr. Ramsay has been delivered in good condition at the Throne Mine. I regret to add that he has broken my left arm with a stick of dynamite which he threw at a chipmunk, now deceased. I will report to-morrow.

"I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

JOSÉ LAS MORÉNAS DE LA MANCHA,
Constable.

"The Officer Commanding,
Wild Horse Creek,
Kootenay, B.C."

This letter, written with pain and difficulty on a piece of wrapping paper, was put, by the Blackguard's directions, into one of the saddle-bags of Mr. Ramsay's horse.

"Make her head fast by a check-rein to the horn of the saddle," he said.

The Blackguard

"Lash the animal on the hindquarters, then turn her loose on the down trail. Since she can't feed until the check-rein's unfastened, she'll go straight to camp, unless she's a born fool."

He was sitting in front of the log-cabin, his arm in splints and a sling, while the prospectors, Long Leslie and Shorty, followed these instructions as to the horse. When the mare was gone, to the extreme disgust of La Mancha's huge black charger, he looked from one to the other of the two miners.

"Prospectors' luck," he said regretfully. "Your hipmunk, now demised, had a nibble of flour a day, while I eat by the bushel."

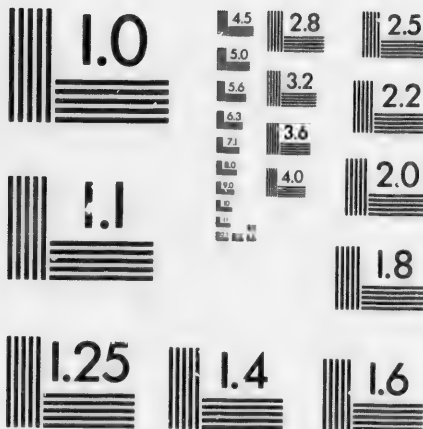
"I guess we can stand it," said Shorty; "you needn't growl till your told."

"Prospectors' luck," said Long Leslie wistfully, "brings a jolly good fellow to remind us we're still alive. It's your turn, Shorty, to wash up—I'm going to smoke." So he sat down beside the Blackguard, not the less enjoying his after-supper pipe because his partner must do the dirty work of the day. "We've been getting lonesome these



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The Blackguard

last few months," he said,—“ since the Lunatic came.”

“ He’s a cad ! ” said the Blackguard.

“ It’s not so much that, although a Chinaman would be better company. Shorty doesn’t mind, he’s used to it ; but I get thinking, and thinking. What does it all amount to—this life ? ”

“ It’s jolly good fun while it lasts.”

“ For you—yes. I used to say the same in my college days, but now— Do you know, Miss Burrows talked with me to-day for the first time. Before that her greetings were like mine to a horse when I stroke its nose. I’m not thirty yet, but from her point of view I don’t count.”

“ I think,” said the Blackguard, “ that the symptoms demand a pill. How is our tongue?—our pulse? Um!—ah!—we shall get over it. But seriously, why don’t you scratch up a fight with somebody—say, with Shorty? That would do you a world of good.”

“ You’re a rare good sort, Blackguard, but you don’t seem to understand. This Tough Nut Claim is as good as claims go—nine feet of passable wet ores run—

The Blackguard

ning a steady average of thirty-five dollars a ton ; but until we get shipping facilities it might as well be at the North Pole. There'll be a railroad through the valley in, say, ten years. Suppose we sell out then at fifty thousand—I shall be forty then, and the only reading matter meanwhile is the *New York Police Gazette*, with a number of the *Century* perhaps once in six months. It isn't good enough."

"By George, when a prospector gets the blues he's worse than an old soldier. Go on, if it does you good."

"I should have been all right but for Burrows yonder, with plenty of cariboo, not a few grizzlies ; and these summits would knock the spots out of the Alpine Club. But the Lunatic, as we call him, has put us all out of date. It's all very well sneering at new ideas, but his methods are further above our heads than American quartz-mining is above the fuddling of the old Spanish colonists. They had ladder shafts, buckets for pumping, an arastra for milling ; we have common sense tunnelling, and send sorted ores to the smelter. Burrows

The Blackguard

sneers at our fissure veins, and quarries the bare country granite. Of course, I knew all along that whole mountain ranges run a dollar and a half to the ton, but I didn't care while milling cost two dollars a ton. This man is a heaven-born genius, who can mine, mill, and render his gold into ingots for only a dollar a ton."

The Blackguard whistled. "If that's true," he said, "the man's got a corner on gold—why, it's awful!"

"Archimedes said that he could capsize the planet if he had leverage. This man has leverage; capitalise his idea, get the place in the Sierras where there are the best conditions of labour, power, freight-ing, gradients, and a seaport; then turn him loose because he has the philosopher's stone which can transmute whole ranges of mountains into gold."

"He's such a cad, too," said the Blackguard. "But how did you find him out?"

"Worked in his mill last winter until he sacked me for calling him a maniac. I did that to draw him out, and once he started bragging in self-defence I had the key to his machinery. He has two

The Blackguard

rotary fans which get up a small cyclone between them. Into that cyclone he throws scraps of rock, and the dust of sharp-edged granite crystals cuts the stones to powder before they have time to drop. He put in a crowbar once, and I actually saw that inch-thick steel shattered into dust."

"Seems to me," said the Blackguard, "that my Tenderfoot is in for something good."

"So I suspected, but would capitalists send out a young fool like that?"

"Oh, I don't know. He's full of ignorance and bliss, but he learns quickly, doesn't get scared, keeps his mouth shut. Besides, he's honest."

Something made La Mancha look round, and there in the twilight, coming down out of the woods, were Miss Burrows and Mr. Ramsay, hand-in-hand.

the infantile innocence of their faces made him laugh; the willowy prospector, rather than embarrass any approaching fun, dodged into the shanty; so, when the enraptured couple stood before him, the Blackguard sat alone.

"We thought we ought to tell you

The Blackguard

first," the Tenderfoot simpered, blushing hotly all over,—“we are engaged.”

“Oh!” said the Blackguard gravely, “since when?”

“Why, ever so long ago,” Miss Burrows sighed, “this afternoon. Won’t you congratulate us?”

“Next week,” said the Blackguard, “if you are still of the same mind, you shall receive my blessing. Have you told Mr. Burrows?”

“No, he was too busy—but we thought that you would”—Then the girl’s face flushed with a sudden indignation. “You said he would, Charlie, but he doesn’t—he’s a beast!”

“I know,” said the Blackguard; “that is the nature of the animal. Do you think, my dear, that this young man is worthy of you?”

“I don’t know,” pondered the little flirt, coyly enough; but, perhaps to prove his ardour, dropped Mr. Ramsay’s hand.

“Do you know, my dear,”—the Blackguard was quite paternal,—“you are going to be very beautiful? How can I commend this young gentleman’s suit while I love you myself? I am jealous of my

The Blackguard

young rival." This because the rival was very justly indignant. "He is young, he is very good-looking, and quite, oh, quite respectable. Now, I'm neither young, nor good, nor beautiful, and I'm not a bit respectable, so I can speak without damaging his prospects. I have no chance whatever, but"—he bowed gracefully—"I love you, my dear, very much."

The girl raised one eye to look at him, then lowered both out of shyness, then pouted towards Mr. Ramsay with her forefinger pressed to her lips as though considering; then, seeing that her fiancé stood stupefied, she thought that she owed him a lesson, and ran for the woods.

Mr. Ramsay would have given chase at once.

"One moment," said the Blackguard, smiling in his saturnine way, while a twinge of pain from his arm made him draw up stiffly. "Young man, you don't let the grass grow underfoot; you needn't be in such a hurry—she'll wait for you, and you have weeks and months to make up for this minute. About that shanty you knocked down this morning?"

The Blackguard

"Well? It's no business of yours—I mean, forgive me for talking like that."

"I forgive you," said the Blackguard blandly. "Don't you think you owe these gentlemen some apology — some compensation?"

"But I daren't offer money."

"You've too much sense. Look here. Burrows keeps a sort of store to supply the prospectors hereabouts. I daresay he'd sell you a couple of Winchester rifles, with a case or so of ammunition, eh?"

"Oh, thanks — what a relief! And they won't be angry?"

"Not very. Now, young man, keep your eye on Miss Violet, because, if I can, I mean to cut you out. I've not much chance, but it's fair to give you warning. Now you may run away."

CHAPTER X

ON the following evening the Black-guard, white with pain, rode on his great black charger into camp, reported huskily to the Orderly Sergeant, and straightway fell out of the saddle, having fainted.

The Colonel was deeply touched when he heard of this. "Indeed," he said to the Sergeant-Major, "that ride down from the Throne is one of the pluckiest things I ever heard of. How many men have I who would not make a broken arm excuse for a month of bilking?"

"He's the best man in D Division, sir, with all his crazy whims."

"When he's fit for light duty," said the Colonel, "find La Mancha an easy billet with staff pay. I'd make him a corporal if he'd only keep straight. Tell him I say so."

The Blackguard

The Colonel was a very fine gentleman.

"You can tell him from me," said the Blackguard roughly, "that his butter's been standing too long in the sun to suit my teeth. He can go to blazes and have the devil for corporal."

But the Sergeant-Major only smiled under his grey moustache, knowing that this from the Blackguard meant gratitude; so, with consent of the Hospital Sergeant, La Mancha was given charge of all the horses, with sevenpence-halfpenny extra per day for nominal services.

Half the troop was out on patrol, or detachment, as usual; discipline at headquarters had relaxed for the summer, and the men left in camp found leisure during the long hot days for no end of lazy swimming down in the river. The Mooyie patrol would come clattering in at sundown; the Windermere patrol would ride out in the cool forenoon; the Weekly Mail arrived and departed on Wednesday; small detachments turned up now and again with Indians, or white desperadoes carefully shackled. So all the men waxed brown, fat, and disorderly, having more good meat than

The Blackguard

they could swallow, fishing, shooting, and occasionally some stirring bout with a horse-thief or murderer at bay. Golden days, starlit nights in the open, a rousing gallop down the meadows, a bath in the river, a cool pipe by the camp fire, with a paradise to live in, the brotherhood of the West for a human interest: such was the life of D Troop all that glorious summer. Officers and men had fought shoulder-to-shoulder through the red-hot excitement of the war only two years ago; they had buried their dead, avenged them with slaughter—and that was a bond of blood between them still.

Long years have passed since 1887, the living are scattered now across the world, but when two old comrades meet, perchance to fight side-by-side again in Rhodesia, or one to help the other out of trouble on some beach in the Southern Seas, or to dine together at a white table in the parish of St. James', dressed up like ridiculous waiters, the bond of blood is strong between us still. The news told then of the old troop begets no laughter: A. deserted; B. shot himself; C. died of typhoid; D., of bad

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liquor ; E. has disappeared ; F. is supposed to have fallen at the Yalu ; G. was found frozen to death in a coal-shed at Medicine Hat ; but for the rest, spirits are calling across the deep from all the continents and all the oceans, and the glass that was lifted for the toast of the good old times falls shattered because some strange remembered voice comes from among the candles, "Well, here's luck !"

But although everything at Wild Horse Creek remained pretty much as before, the Blackguard was entirely changed since his trip to the Throne. Mother Darkness was alleged to be meditating an action for breach of promise ; word went by the patrols up to Golden, down to the United States boundary, that La Mancha was "on the make." Corporal Dandy Irvine, on detachment at Windermere, sent down a box of cigars for thankoffering. The Colonel, in private correspondence with a friend at Fort Saskatchewan, sent the news as of more interest than even his record of trout. So the tale spread among the Mounted Police, from the Saskatchewan to the

The Blackguard

boundary, from the foothills to Manitoba, over five hundred thousand square miles of the Great Plains, that the Blackguard had "got religion."

The announcement was made by La Mancha himself down at the bathing-place. "Yes, boys, I've got religion; I've sworn off getting drunk,—I'm far too good to live. If any son of a gun corrupts my morals by saying cuss words in my presence, I'll tear off his hide from scalp to heels, and roll him in salt for a"—

"Why, dammit!" said Mutiny, spluttering up after a dive.

"Mutiny," answered the Blackguard, "the word 'dammit' is profane language. Come out and have your eyes bunged up, you"—

"See you in — first!" said Mutiny blandly, upon which the Blackguard, half-dressed after his bath, forgetting that his left arm was broken, walked into the river, gave chase, captured his prey, grabbed him by his red hair, and ducked him until he nearly choked, making remarks the while which are quite impossible to repeat.

The Blackguard

"How can I be meek and gentle," he said afterwards, "when you fellows disturb my peace of mind by using vulgar language? Any man who doesn't want to behave like a Methodist minister at a tea-party has got to fight me first."

Two or three tried, but as La Mancha with one hand was equal to any able-bodied pugilist in D Troop, there set in a tyranny more ruthless than that of the Commissioner at headquarters during the setting-up drills. Only the Blackguard and the Sergeant-Major could relieve their feelings, except under pain of dire chastisement, and before pay-day any man who wanted to tell an improper story found it expedient to resort to the canteen.

Now, it so happened that a regulation English Curate missionising in the neighbourhood, being grieved at the spiritual destitution of the Mounted Police, had offered to hold an open-air service monthly at Wild Horse Creek. So the Co'onel, to encourage the young man, ordered a church-parade. One or two, including La Mancha, got out of it by being for the

The Blackguard

time Roman Catholic, others found it impossible to neglect staff duties such as cooking, the rest had their names put on the sick-list. The Colonel thereupon commanded that sick and cripples, cooks and Catholics, should, at the sound of the bugle, attend his parade on pain of being cast into prison.

This brought about a mass-meeting, at which it was proposed by the Blackguard, and seconded by all hands, that any son of a sea-cook who sang, responded, contributed, or otherwise assisted during the church-parade should afterwards be chastised with belts.

The service was a duet between the Parson and the Colonel.

Afterwards the regulation Curate, mounted in deep dejection upon a mule, was riding away to an afternoon service elsewhere when he was waylaid in a lonely place by the Blackguard.

"Good-morning, Padre."

The Curate, responding to a military salute, drew rein. "Can I be of service to you?"

"If you can spare me a moment."

The Blackguard

The Curate dismounted, and, letting his mule graze at the end of the rein, sat down by La Mancha's side. "I have heard, Mr. La Mancha, that you are a Roman Catholic."

"So have I. Now at the canteen we ask for Scotch, but we only get hell smoke. It isn't good, but it gets there all the same. I want to sample your religion."

"It was freely offered to you this morning, though."

"No, it was rammed down our throats, so I didn't quite catch the flavour."

"You mean, the parade was compulsory."

"Yes; if it had been left to our choice the only men absent would have been the cook and the herder, but your performance this morning disagreed with us. We called it an insult to Pater-Noster, and any man who took part in that would have been thrashed within an inch of his life."

"I think you were right," said the Curate. "Believe me, Mr. La Mancha, I shall never, so long as I live, forget this lesson. The next service shall be free."

The Blackguard

"Then we shall read you the second lesson, Padre."

"Which is?"

"That we haven't had a chance of going to church for months. Hand round the hat and I promise you there won't be any buttons. Another thing, cover your reading-desk with the Union Jack and there'll be no whispering."

"Why?"

"Because a year after the Rebellion, when we had memorial church-parades for the dead, the order was, 'Side arms and the flag on the table.' The boys will remember."

"This is wonderful! And now, my dear fellow, since you've helped me so much, how can I help you?"

La Mancha looked across the valley, then slowly raised his eyes up to the Throne Mine; but what he said or what the Curate answered belongs to themselves and to the Almighty.

CHAPTER XI

ONE of the Blackguard's endearing traits had always been his generosity—boundless in that when he had nothing of his own to give he lent and gave things that were not his own, causing thereby much internecine strife. The only time he had ever been known to be worsted in fair fight was after lending to an intending deserter the shot-gun which he had borrowed from Buckeye Blossom, heavyweight champion of Medicine Hat. But now he had got religion, and had fought two pitched battles for the right to read his Bible. Not that the boys cared much what was his choice of literature, it being all the same to the crowd whether he amused himself with the Bible, or a dictionary, or the *New York Police Gazette*, provided that he kept it to himself; but the Blackguard, for want of

The Blackguard

practice in the art, found it convenient to read like a schoolboy, aloud. Hence the pitched battles, which resulted in undisturbed readings from the Gospels, mingled with a running commentary, so naive, so quaint, and so exceedingly funny, that the audience waxed daily in numbers, until, for peace and quiet, the reader betook himself to the shelter of the woods. Here he read daily, expounding the Scriptures to an audience of disdainful squirrels and song-birds.

But to return to the matter of his generosity.

The immediate outcome of his queer religion was that the Blackguard became more avaricious than Shylock. When his chum, Dandy Irvine, sent him that box of cigars from Windermere, instead of giving them all away to his friends, he sold them two for a shilling. Some brought cash, with which, and a little credit, he bought a further supply ; but for the most part the boys accepted the trading as a joke, running up accounts which they imagined to be purely fictitious. Then pay-day came, when the Blackguard was able for the first time to partially

The Blackguard

release his left arm, when, also for the first time, he had staff-pay not hypothecated by any previous fine. After the parade he went to all his debtors.

"Little Murphy, you owe me one dollar for cigars."

"Oh, come off," said little Murphy innocently. "What game do you think you're playing at?"

"Pay or fight," said the Blackguard.

Murphy paid, also all the others, big and little, when the Blackguard went about smiling grimly upon his customers. But if he was ruthless in exacting cash or black eyes, La Mancha was punctilious as to the payment of his own debts—in cigars. He became wholesale dealer to the sergeants' mess and the canteen, imported pipes, dealt in shot-guns, ornamental revolvers, books, and musical instruments. His mouth organs, tin whistles, and concertinas became a far worse nuisance in the valley than ever the Indians had been, but even these had comparatively little to say compared with La Mancha's pigs. Possibly the story of Daniel led to the cornet, concertina, Jews' harp, mouth organ, penny whistle, oboe,

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and all kinds of music ; by La Mancha's own confession, the matter of the Gadarene swine suggested a litter of pigs, bought cheap from a rancher, raised on the cook's hitherto misapplied slops, and ultimately sold at a handsome profit to the Quartermaster. All this was a matter of time, but under enormous disadvantages, despite the delay and inconvenience caused by almost incessant travelling on duty, the Blackguard was reputed long before autumn to be the richest man in D Troop.

But to return to a much earlier date. When the Tenderfoot's luggage was brought over from Windermere, Dandy Irvine, who was then at headquarters, volunteered its safe delivery at the Throne Mine in consideration of leave for hunting between Saturday and Monday. It was then that the Blackguard wrote his first letter to Miss Violet Burrows. Letter-writing in camp is always a serious matter, because the needful materials must be borrowed or improvised. When a recruit first joins, he is apt to write mainly to frighten his mother with the assumption of mythical surroundings

The Blackguard

borrowed from inexpensive fiction, thus:—

“DEAR MOTHER,—

“I write in the saddle, on the summit of the Rocky Mountains, surrounded by hostile Indians, a sword in one hand and a revolver in the other.” [Then the young imagination flags.] “There is no news, but please write soon,—and send some money, as washing is awfully expensive.

“YOUR LOVING SON.”

But a hardened sinner like the Blackguard writes seldom or never, finding the pen awkward after shovel, axe, and gun; so the epistle to Miss Burrows, of course a strictly private communication, was delivered painfully, tongue in cheek, head askew, with a perhaps too copious discharge of ink.

Miss Violet read it with such a disdainful tilt of her little pert nose that the blotted characters were well-nigh out of range. She was sitting during the Sunday rest at the cliff edge, with Dandy Irvine on one side and Mr. Ramsay, jealously observant, on the other. “Humph,” she looked sideways at the glowing scarlet of Dandy’s serge jacket, then at his shining boots and glittering spurs, “he came

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up here," she said, "in an undershirt and one of those flappy hats. Besides, he was all dusty."

"But then, you see," explained the Blackguard's champion, "he can afford to please himself as to appearances. If I were a great aristocrat I might do the same."

"A great what?"

"Don't you know? His brother is a Duke, Ambassador from Spain to the Court of St. James'; La Mancha's cousins are mostly emperors, kings, and grand dukes; the Cid was one of his ancestors, not to mention Charles the Fifth and Philip the Second. Of course, he's only a Don, which means 'My lord,' but"—

"There," cried Miss Violet. "Oh, won't I give my Uncle beans—I'll teach him!"

"You must not neglect your filial duties, Miss Burrows; you must bring him up in the way he should go; it's your duty."

"Tell me some more."

"I will. Who let him leave the mountain before his arm was properly set? When he got back to camp he just

The Blackguard

managed to report to the Orderly Sergeant, then rolled off his horse in a dead swoon. You ought to have kept him here for a month."

Miss Burrows turned upon the Tenderfoot in withering scorn. "Your fault entirely!"

After that the Tenderfoot sulked.

"Tell me some more," said the lady.

"Well, two years ago, when we had our first scrapping match with the half-breeds, we got an awful thrashing. You've heard of Duck Lake Fight?"

"Sit up and listen." Miss Violet brought the Tenderfoot to attention with a very small pebble, which missed. "Oh, this is awfully jolly,—do go on!"

"There were ninety-four of us, police and civilians, caught in a trap by three hundred and sixty rebels. They were all round us under cover in a sort of horse-shoe position, with a detachment stealing quietly through the bush to cut off our rear. We police unharnessed, drew up the sleighs in line by way of shelter, with one seven-pounder on the right, all in a mortal funk. Joe McKay, our half-breed interpreter, rode forward with Crozier to

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meet an Indian who came out with a white rag to talk. We thought they would argue all day, but suddenly the Indian made a grab at McKay's rifle; and Joe drew his revolver and riddled him. Then Crozier gave the order to fire, but Joe Howe, in charge of the gun, yelled out, 'You're right in our way, sir!'

"'Never mind me!' said Crozier. Then the rifles began to crackle on both sides, and our thirty-five civilians were detached off up a lane on the right. One of the police boys was sent to recall them, because the snow was waist-deep when once they got off the trail. The way was a sort of lane, with a fence on the left, bush on the right shutting off all view of the main crowd, and a log-house at the end full of loop-holes pouring out a most awful fire. You see, the half-breeds had filled that little house with all their crack marksmen, while our boys had nothing to aim at but logs and smoke. Men were falling thick, the snow was too deep for a charge, and there was no particular use for getting to that house anyway. At last, what was left of the party fell back, fighting hard, leaving their dead in the

The Blackguard

snow. But one of them wasn't dead, only wounded, and that was the policeman who had followed the civilians out of shelter. He saw the half-breeds swarming down from the cabin, Indians swinging their clubbed rifles to make sure of those who were down by cracking skulls. I guess that policeman was too far gone to care; he watched them lazily through a sort of haze, forgetting all about the full revolver slung on his belt. Of course, there were no white men left in sight, but Indians and half-breeds were swarming out from cover as our whole outfit, police and civilian, harnessed their teams for the retreat. But one of the police remembered having seen his own chum go out after the fools' charge of civilians, and never come back. Any other man would have tried his best to forget, but this chap broke away through the bush, waded in deep snow to where his chum lay among the dead, fired a few revolver shots to keep back the Indians, slung the wounded man over his shoulder, and brought him back to the main road just as the last sleigh was passing under cover of the rear-guard."

The Blackguard

"What a hero!" cried the Tenderfoot.

"Yes; that was the Blackguard, and the wounded man was *me*."

"Charlie," said Miss Violet after that interview, "why are you only a Tenderfoot?"

"You're always flinging that in my face. How can I help it?"

"Don't be cross. A Romeo by any other name would—. No, a quotation is worse than a rat-trap. But there is something wrong with you; I know there is. You don't wear pretty clothes like Mr. Irvine, you don't write me beautiful blotty love-letters like the Blackguard."

"How can"—

"Now, there you are again, flying at me like a sitting hen when I poke too hard. I took you to worship me on approval—you don't suit—you're too horrid; I shall give you a month's notice—so there! Now, as to giving you a 'character.' Of course, I don't want to be hard—so you be very good this month and—I'll see about it."

CHAPTER XII

MR. BURROWS was gravely disturbed. Sufficient had been his responsibility ever since a dying sister bequeathed to him the guardianship of her child. At first he had not taken the matter very seriously. The girl was at school, doubtless being well cared for, but presently, although every dollar he could raise was needed for costly mining machinery, he had to pay her tuition fees. Then the Lady Superintendent wrote, hinting deftly that her pupil had reached an age when the chaperon might have a more desirable influence than a teacher. He never read between the lines, he was too little a man of the world to realise that a paying pupil would not be unacceptable to any lady superintendent so long as the young person was docile. The young person in question was anything but docile, as Mr. Burrows found to his grief when Miss

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Violet came to rule himself and his mine with a rod of iron. Certainly she cost less at a time of straitened means than his late Chinese cook ; but then, she was such a nuisance. He loved her not at all, his affections being wholly devoted to certain patented steel fans in a cylinder. Unlike the steel fans, she set his will at naught, ignored his rules, his regulations, his beautifully machine-made precepts, distracted him with interruptions, pulled his ear, demanded new frocks which were quite beyond his means, and finally, to crown her misdemeanours, fell in love. His cylinder never fell in love, or, if it conceived so indelicate a line of action, would certainly refrain from two several and concurrent flirtations.

Miss Violet seemed bound by no rules, subject to no conceivable laws, therefore, like that nonsensical abstraction, Religion, she was beyond the pale of reasonable study. Not being acquainted with the factors of the love problem, or dealing in the abstruse mathematics of whims, Mr. Burrows blandly ignored the whole subject for six weeks ; consequently, when circumstances compelled him to bring to bear the

The Blackguard

forces of his intellect, he was just six weeks too late. So far as he could see, which was not quite to the end of his nose, he then found the facts somewhat as follows.

Miss Violet was in love, but whether with young Ramsay, or with that big policeman, or with both at once, was a matter of no moment. Inasmuch as Mr. Burrows had reached the age of fifty without loving anybody better than himself, Miss Violet's behaviour was at once ridiculous and unnatural. She was only nineteen, a child fresh from school, her vocation in life to cook his meals, make his bed, keep her tongue from chatter and her fingers from his ears. (The fact that his ears were large and seductively ugly could not palliate the young woman's mania for stroking them.) In short, Miss Violet had no right to love, and, as to marrying, her duty was to himself. Almost with tears in his eyes he pictured the loneliness to which she would selfishly consign him if she married. She should not marry—it would not be good for her.

Then there was the big policeman, who never failed to spend his Sundays hard by at the Tough Nut Claim. Mr. Burrows,

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priding himself on his powers of observation, found something furtive, something underhand and dishonourable in the way that policeman avoided his own hospitality. He had written to the Officer Commanding at Wild Horse Creek, protesting on behalf of the "mining population" against weekly visits of a disreputable character to the Throne Mining Camp. This took effect upon the Colonel, who counted any disparagement of his men as a personal affront to himself, and, pending the chastisement of the writer, saw that La Mancha never asked in vain for Sunday's leave.

And, last element of the love problem, Mr. Ramsay, who should have been making an exhaustive study of mine and mill for his father's firm, spent the time sulking about the hills. A workhouse pauper who has dropped a penny down a grating could not have looked more forlorn.

So two months went by. Miss Violet very demure, like a kitten after its first mouse; the Blackguard spending every Saturday and Sunday night in the saddle to snatch brief hours for courtship; the Tenderfoot perched in desolate places brooding on suicide.

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Then of a sudden Mr. Ramsay became demurely expectant, and Miss Violet unnaturally gay. Some new absurdity was in the wind, so Mr. Burrows, with the gingerly air of one broaching a gift of untasted wine, had a few words with his niece.

"Come here, Violet."

"Yes, Uncle."

"What does all this mean?"

"Nothing, Uncle."

"That policeman did not come to the Tough Nut Claim on Sunday."

"Didn't he, Uncle?"

"Why didn't he come?"

"I'm sure I don't know. He doesn't belong to me. Do you want him very much, Uncle?"

"Want him? Of course, I don't want him. What should I want him for? Now, answer me this—what are your intentions with regard to Mr. Ramsay?"

"I was just thinking about that." She perched on the table beside him. "The saucepan's too small, you see. Would you like him poached?"

Since there was but little change to be got out of Miss Violet, Mr. Burrows

The Blackguard

went off fuming and fussing in search of his guest, who was discovered in a state of innocent bliss, fishing with rod and line from the edge of the great precipice.

"What *are* you doing?"

"Hush, you'll disturb the swallows. One of them pecked my worm."

"Haw—ah—indeed." Mr. Burrows sat down on the next rock, grunting. "Mister Ramsay, I know that these matters are delicate, and require to be dealt with by a man of tact."

"Indeed they do—they won't even look at a fly."

"I am not alluding to birds, Mr. Ramsay. May I ask what your intentions are with regard to my niece?"

"Eh?" Mr. Ramsay glanced at the other sideways. "I say, would you mind very much if I were to—to pay my addresses to Miss Violet?"

"Certainly not, my dear Mr. Ramsay. The human affection always meets with my warmest approbation—the—in fact, my very warmest approbation. Let me shake you by the hand."

"I wouldn't, if I were you—fact is—

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worms, you know. I hope you're not sitting on any of them?"

Mr. Burrows' approbation of the human affections was suddenly mitigated; he jumped up with a sudden but strictly philosophical remark—but seeing that this matter of the worms was a false alarm, he breathed more freely, and, grunting again, sat down.

"No, that's all right!" the Tenderfoot felt very much relieved. "You haven't spoilt one of them. I ought to tell you, though,—you were so busy I didn't like to mention it before,—that we're engaged."

"Since when, my dear young friend?"

"Oh, months ago—it must be supper time. Why don't they bite? I love her desperately."

"Your sentiments do you justice. The alliance between our families will do much, my young friend, to strengthen the material bonds which are about to so closely unite my interests to those of your respected father. The brilliant future in store for the Burrows-Ramsay Mining & Milling Syndicate Limited"—

"By George," cried the Tenderfoot joyfully, while the rod jerked in his hand, "I've got a bite!"

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CHAPTER XIII

DOWN by the American boundary a stream called Eagle Creek has cut a ravine two hundred feet deep in the plateau at the base of the Rockies, carving the banks into a medley of grotesque and isolated mounds strewn with boulders, nearly void of grass, whose eccentric shapes give the view from the bottom a most singular and impressive contour. The stream itself had dwindled under the autumn heat, leaving only a string of miry ponds, whose stagnant waters fed the few fruit-laden shrubs upon their margins, and beside them was half an acre left of pleasant grass. Here were round patches, traces of camp-fires, by which many travellers in that lonely way had been wont to rest. How waggons got down the trail to the bottom without accident is one of the many wonders of the West.

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The sun was set behind the Selkirks, the wind was sinking, the air had a blue dryness blown from some forest fire; heavy, sultry enough to make all nature sulk. Foxes were dodging about from cover to cover, a crane stood melancholy in the untroubled water, meditating on one leg, hopeless of even a desultory minnow by way of supper. A cloud of dust arose behind the southern boundary of the ravine, the crane flapped sorrowfully away, hearing a distant tramp of horses, and presently a mounted man in bright cavalry uniform rode to the edge of the hills, standing out against the deepening sky a beautiful silhouette, motionless as a statue. Then, two by two, came twenty mounted men, each with a rifle poised on the horn of his Mexican saddle, and many a glittering point of brass and steel about his harness. At a word of command they dismounted to advance, leading their horses down the slope; while behind them appeared five waggons, each carrying two men, and a rear-guard of two, who lingered a bit to be clear of the dust which arose in clouds from the groaning wheels of the

The Blackguard

transport. Some of these riders wore canvas clothes adorned with brass buttons, some buckskin suits, or blue flannel shirts, or old red jackets, according to the pleasure of the wearers. All had riding-boots, spurs, leather belts carrying a row of brass cartridges, and big revolvers with a lanyard buckled to the butts, and passing over one shoulder.

Reaching the level land at the bottom, the mounted men formed up in line, and the waggons drew up behind them, forty feet apart; a rope was stretched along the waggon line, then, leaving his saddle at the dismounting point, each trooper had made his horse fast to the rope before ever the teams were unharnessed. Meanwhile three men from the transport had selected a spot by some bushes where an iron bar was set on uprights five feet apart; and, before the sound of axes had ceased in the bush behind, three full camp kettles swung over a roaring fire. A bell tent was pitched for the officer in command, Inspector Fraser Gaye; the horses were watered, groomed, fed with a liberal ration of oats; then, at a last merry call from the bugle, there was a general dash to the

The Blackguard

waggon for plates and cups, and knives were whipped from belt or bootleg, ready for an astonishing slaughter of fried pork and hard tack, mitigated with lashings of scalding tea. The meal was followed by an uplifting of delicate grey smoke toward the clouds, and a lively fire of chaff in most of the British and American dialects.

At times the whole crowd would turn upon one or two who dared to converse in their native French-Canadian patois, "A wuss Nitchie! Can't you talk white? Get away back to your reserve, or behave like a white man, you mongrel!"

But all this was silenced presently, because the horses must be hobbled, or picketed out for the night, and a guard of three men was detailed to watch by turns until sunrise. Blankets were being spread out along the saddle line, and in and under the waggon; first post sounded, last post sounded, then the third of the bugle melodies.

"That's all, boys. Dream of the girls you've lost. Lights—out!"

So the last sad notes echoed away along the sterile hills, and there was silence under the starlight.

The Blackguard

The horses were pulling at the grass, or roving about with a quick, sharp clank of the hobbles, the man on duty gliding ghostlike among them, speaking to one or another lest they should fear him in the silence. All seemed well with the tired beasts, so the "picket" strolled back to the dying fire, drank a little tea, lit his pipe, and stood thinking. His body seemed gigantic against the light, his face borrowed something of satanic dignity from the glare, the light glimmered upon the points of his harness, while he kicked lazily the backs of smouldering logs till the flames leaped up again. Poor Blackguard! His thoughts were bitter that night; memories of the innocent-seeming child he had grown to love, and still trusted lovingly, until under the girl's frank laugh he had seen the woman's flirting. She was a woman—playing fast and loose—Miss Violet the Vixen, irresponsible. The Blackguard's heart was too great for her understanding, a wonderful spirit of passionate tenderness, compassionate forgiveness, and large tolerance. The surface of him was all humour and quaint devilry, the depth of him hid much

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love and curious wisdom. She had tried to play with him the game of cat and mouse ; so, smiling inly at her mistake, he had gone away, sending no word or giving any sign. When the cat wanted her mouse again, when she longed for him and could not do without him, she would send him a sign. If not — the Blackguard sighed over his pipe.

Perhaps he had been good through these summer months to no purpose ; a lot of genuine religion had very likely, it seemed, been wasted, desperate efforts after wealth and respectability all thrown away. In that case, a couple of weeks hence, when his five years expired, he would spend the money he had made and saved in giving the " boys " a lively night or two, then re-enlist and be as bad as he pleased. But yet, if she would send a sign.

He looked up, hearing the crackle of a twig.

" Halt—who goes there ? " he cried.

" All right ! " came a shaky voice out of the darkness.

" Advance, and be recognised ! "

" Eh ? "

The Blackguard

"Advance, or I fire!"

"Oh, give us a rest."

These were the war challenges, and the Blackguard had only used them to scare an evident stranger who did not know enough to say "Friend."

"All right," he said. "Advance, and be damned. Who are you?"

"Hello, Blackguard! The very man I want—I'm Long Leslie."

"Sit down, old chap. Help yourself from the tea kettle. Well, how are things?"

"I'm fencing for General Buster," said Leslie,— "got to earn our winter grub at the Tough Nut."

"How's the claim?"

"Ripping. Came on a splendid pay streak up at the hanging wall. These contact propositions are always worth assessments, anyway. Shorty and me are both working at Buster's, and when I heard your bugle calls I thought I'd stroll over. Come up from Tobacco Plains?"

"Yes, bound north again."

"I guessed you were with this outfit."

"Thanks, old man."

"I hear that Arrapahoe Bill is in

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trouble up at the bull pasture on Throne Creek."

"What's the old tough gaoled for this time?"

"Not that. He seems to have been having a scrapping match with a grizzly bear, but I haven't heard if he'll live."

"Poor devil! Any other news?"

"Oh yes, that Tenderfoot of yours is making the fur fly."

"What fur?—the Burrows girl?"

"Yes; they're to be married before the month end, according to the Lunatic. By the way, I've got something of yours. She asked me to hand it over if I met you. Here."

A Mounted Police button dropped into La Mancha's hand, but he said nothing.

"The bush fires are bad this fall on the upper Kootenay."

"Yes, and on the Mooyie. Bitt's was burned out last week."

"Serve him right for a good-for-nothing greaser. Well, I must be getting home. Long day to-morrow. Kind regards to the boys. Good-night, old chap."

"Good-night."

When the time came the Blackguard

The Blackguard

kicked his relief awake, and the relief in due course kicked another chap whose turn was the morning watch. The stars were doing a very poor business that night on account of the pungent dry smoke from burning woods, but when they gave up their half-hearted twinkling as a bad job, the dawn mist rising from the meadow was cool and ghostlike as usual; full of dream-faces, if one could only have seen them, ghosts of nice children, pretty girls, and respectable parents, who had come to call on the Mounted Police while they were off duty.

Startling all the echoes, making the keen ear tremble, waking the summer world, and losing coherence in the distant hills, *réveille* rang out clear and sharp, a burst of triumphant, unexpected music—and the night was gone.

Then, to successive bugle calls, blankets were rolled, waggons loaded, the horses carefully tended, breakfast was eaten, and almost before the sun had lighted the deep ravine the mounted party began to toil up the hillside, and the waggons followed groaning across the meadow.

CHAPTER XIV

MISS VIOLET and the Tenderfoot were sitting on a bench in front of the cabin, she peeling potatoes, he watching her.

"Go on," she said wearily.

"And then we shall have a house in Park Lane."

"We had that before—next door to the Duke of Something."

"Yes, in the ground just above; I forget the number. I shall have a private hansom to drive down to Board Meetings in the City; and when I come home tired in the evening you shall entertain all the millionaires we do business with. We shall get tremendous investments over the dinner-table. Won't it be jolly?"

She yawned. "Yes, I suppose so. What will you do with my Uncle?"

"Oh, he shall be our general agent in South Africa."

The Blackguard

"That's a long way off, and perhaps he'll get wrecked coming home. I like that part. He shall have a large memorial window."

"Yes, a huge one, or say a dozen in St. Paul's Cathedral. Of course, I shall be a great benefactor to all sorts of things, and they'll put your picture in the *Sketch* as the great philanthropist's wife; of course, with an interview."

"An interview all about you, I suppose?"

"No, about my great gifts to the Polytechnics, my College for Commercial Travellers, my County Council work."

"Then you can write the beastly thing yourself; so there!"

"I intend to be a very great man," said the Tenderfoot dreamily. "Of course, you must never interrupt me in the evenings when I'm busy dictating letters to my secretaries."

"What shall I do then?"

"Oh, I don't know. You'll have lots of things to manage—servants, dinner-parties, and"—

She dropped her potatoes and kicked

The Blackguard

over the pail, scattering its contents broadcast.

"Pick them up," she said.

He picked them up.

The little lady sat with her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands, sniffing at the acridness of raw potatoes, staring gloomily the while out into the Sunday stillness of the afternoon. "I wish I was dead," she said miserably, addressing the Rocky Mountains over the way.

"But why?" He sat up on his haunches, the pail in one hand, an earthy vegetable in the other, staring horrified. "You shouldn't say such things. It's wicked. I won't have you say such things. I forbid it."

"You won't?" muttered Miss Violet vindictively; then gazing down at him with portentous emphasis she said—

"Damn!"

"Oh, I say!"

"Yes, you say. It's always you—'I'll this, or I'll that. It's my wish—I—I—I.' You're made of I's. There's nothing else in you but 'I.' Now, you listen to what little me says—I hate you, and if I marry

The Blackguard

you I'll make you as miserable as I am, you toad."

"My dear, I love you."

"No, you don't—you only love yourself; but I've got to marry you to get away from my Uncle. He gets on my nerves. Go away!"

Mr. Ramsay stared.

"Go away!"

Mr. Ramsay went mournfully away down towards the mill, where Mr. Burrows was saying his Sunday afternoon prayers to the steel cylinder. Half-way, among the trees, and just out of sight from the cabin, was a big wooden flume carrying water-power for a plant of turbines which turned the Burrows' generators, which actuated the fans, which ground the stone, which held the gold, which was to pay for the Park Lane house—for that is the stuff which dreams are made of. Mr. Ramsay sat down on the flume feeling very miserable.

But he felt worse than miserable presently when he saw a horseman ride up to the mill whom he recognised to his utter disgust as the Blackguard.

"Hello, Burrows!" La Mancha's big

The Blackguard

voice rang out through the woods. "Want a word with you, Burrows. Come out and talk like a white man. You won't?—ah, well, I'll talk while you keep your mouth shut. Are you in charge of Miss Violet Burrows? You are, eh? All right. I'm paying my addresses to Miss Violet, and if she'll have me I'm going to marry her. D'you hear? Yes, marry her. I didn't ask for your consent—I only ask favours from gentlemen. All right, Burrows, be good to yourself."

So, having propitiated her guardian, La Mancha turned his horse uphill to propose to the lady.

Meanwhile Mr. Ramsay was considerably ahead, out of sight, running through the trees for dear life, determined to get the lady out of his reach.

"Violet," he cried hysterically, coming up before the cabin, "come with me—there's a great big cariboo grazing up on the spur." He ran into the cabin, snatching up his rifle. "Come—by the back way—quick!"

"You saw a cariboo?" said Miss Violet calmly. "You were down in

The Blackguard

the timber and you saw him up on the spur?"

"Come quick!" he cried in an ecstasy of excitement. But she would not move from her seat. Then the Blackguard emerged from the timber, riding steadily up the slope.

"I see," said Miss Violet. "Be quick, Charlie, or you'll lose your cariboo; I'll stay here."

Mad with excitement, Mr. Ramsay seized her forcibly by the wrists, and half dragged, half carried her into the cabin.

"You shan't meet him," he cried. "You shan't!—you shan't!"

Flushed with a sudden rage, Miss Violet wrenched herself loose, struck him violently across the face, then ran out of the cabin and breathless down the hill.

When the Blackguard jumped from his horse at the sight of her, she, scarce knowing what she did, flung herself into his arms.

"My love," he said gently, "what's the matter?—poor little woman, who frightened you?"

She was crying like a frightened child,

The Blackguard

clinging to him, swaying to and fro, while the big sobs shook her little body.

Then suddenly she stopped short, and looked up in his face very much surprised.

"What was I doing?" she said.

"Breaking my heart with your trouble—poor little woman. Tell me who hurt you, and I'll kill him at once. Why, your wrists are all bruised and red. Who dared to touch you?"

But she would not say.

"Then I won't bully you by asking questions, dear. I love you too much for that. I came the first moment I could when I got the button."

"What button?" she asked with the frankest innocence.

"What button!" he laughed. "A little bit of brass that said 'Come back'—that said 'I love you, Blackguard, though you are a bad lot.'"

"You are, you know."

"I was until I loved you, dear; but now—by the mercy that is in love—I'm good again. Do you know what is the loveliest thing God ever made?—Laughter and tears mixed up in a woman's face. And you've confessed you love me!"

The Blackguard

"Don't be silly."

"That means, don't wait," and so he kissed her on the lips.

"I don't think I quite love you, after all; you've never put on your uniform yet when you've come to see me. I suppose I'm not worth all that trouble, though."

"I will next time," he said,—“for our wedding-day.”

"Our what?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

"Won't your horse run away?"

"Who could run away when you're in sight, Violet?"

"That's quite nice. They say things like that in a novel."

She sat down beside him, and they two watched the black horse smelling the local grass with an air of disparagement.

"It's very silly of you to marry a Blackguard, Violet."

"I never said I would."

"They only *say* it in books. In life they mean it. Do you know, I've nothing to marry on but three pigs, a few boxes of cigars, one hundred dollars, and the chance of a job breaking horses? Now,

The Blackguard

I suppose you could do much better than that, eh?"

"A house in Park Lane," she said, "and dinners for City people in the evenings; but I mustn't interrupt him while he's busy."

Her hand stole into his, and he kissed it after the manner, perhaps, of the Spanish Court. Then he thought—after the manner of the Blackguard—that lips were not so cold, and more responsive.

They were.

"Do you know," she said, half frightened, "that this moss is very damp?"

"My lips are still very dry."

At that she sprang up, laughing. "Catch me," she cried; "catch me," and she ran for the woods.

CHAPTER XV

SINCE the Blackguard's time had nearly expired, the Colonel sent for him.

"Sit down, La Mancha; I want a few words with you."

"Thank you, sir." The Blackguard removed his forage cap, and sat down on a camp-stool just within the tent.

"The Sergeant-Major tells me that you do not wish to 'take on' again. We have served together some years now, La Mancha."

"And jolly good years they were, sir."

The Colonel smiled. "Well, I don't grudge them—we've had a good mistress to serve, besides fine work to do for her, breaking in this rough young country; but perhaps it's just as well to think of the future."

"I hear, sir, that you've bought a big ranche near Macleod."

The Blackguard

"Yes, I hope to serve as a citizen for the rest of my time. If ever you come that way I can promise you a welcome."

"Thank you, Colonel; I shall remember that."

"You see, La Mancha, all my best men have left me one by one. Two of them fell during the Rebellion, one shot himself, Peters died of mountain fever at Battleford, Buster Joe is ranching in Montana, Jones the Less writes to me from London, where he is doing well, and—but you know. One can't take such an interest in the recruits—shave-tails, you call them, and so forth; and now that things are settling tamely down, we're not so necessary as we were. New times, new manners—I don't blame you for taking your freedom. What are your plans, La Mancha?"

"First, I'm going to marry."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir, the Burrows girl up at the Throne. At first I hope to do something at breaking horses, then take land down the valley. Her life won't be rougher than it is now."

The Colonel smiled, because at last he

The Blackguard

knew the secret of La Mancha's reformation.

"May I congratulate you? I do most heartily, for I'm told that she's the nicest and prettiest girl in Kootenay."

"Will you come to the wedding, sir, on the twenty-fifth, at the Mission? The Padre says he'll be ready for me at noon."

"I would like to come very much," said the Colonel; "but among other details—mind I know you well—have you the young lady's consent?"

"She says I'm not half good enough for her—that looks all right, sir,—eh?"

The Colonel laughed. "I'll be there if I can."

"And give the bride away, sir?"

"But how about Burrows?"

"Hang Burrows—he'll have to take a back seat."

"One thing more, La Mancha. In this particularly risky business has it occurred to you that you ought to have steady employment?"

"I'll have to turn 'road agent' otherwise."

"Rather than that, I'll give you a note to my friend General Buster, who, I know,

The Blackguard

is looking out for a good man. Ride down and see to-morrow, and while you're about it take a two weeks' furlough up to the date of your discharge. Why, that's the twenty-fifth, your wedding-day !”

“It's awfully good of you, sir.”

“Don't mention it. I'll send you the letter by the Orderly Corporal. Ask him to step this way.”

“Oh, you poor devils,” said the Blackguard, lying at ease on his blankets, to half a dozen men at work in the tent cleaning their accoutrements for to-morrow's muster parade. “Sweat, you poor workers ; ram your button-sticks down your throats for coolness.”

One of the boys heaved a boot brush at him, which he caught deftly. “Now I'm richer,” he said “by a brush. Gentlemen, this brush of solid squat root, bristled out of the Quartermaster's private beard, heavy with valuable blacking,—how much am I offered for this brush ?”

“Damn you and your brush.”

“One damn for the brush. Gentlemen, I am offered one for this priceless object of virtue—one damn I am offered,—going

The Blackguard

at one—going—going—positively thrown away!" and he flung it at the owner's head, making a bull's-eye.

The victim had not time to be resentful, but, wiping his eye with the back of the brush, went on polishing his boot-tops vindictively.

"Lick, spit and polish," laughed the Blackguard. "Every day has its dog; but I'm a free nigger to-morrow. No more parades, no more pack-drill, no more guards, no more cells, no more 'fatigues' save this bed-fatigue, which suits my temperament. I'm a free wolf, and it's my night to howl; I come from Bitter Creek—the higher up the worse the waters—and I'm from the source. Go it, you pigeon-livered shave-tails; clean your harness, you poor-souled recruities, you pemmican-eaters, you ravenous pie-biters, you ring-tailed snorters. This is my song of victory after five years without beer—five years h—l without benefit of clergy, five years everybody's dog on Government rations!

"The Blackguard was taken young and raised on hard tack, was full of skilly, beans, and sow-belly; sweated on parade,

The Blackguard

rode hell-for-leather after horse-thieves ; but now he's going to have a good time being alive, and don't you forget it ! ”

By this time missiles were flying at him from all directions, but the Blackguard wriggled away, rolled out under the flap of the tent, and went off to chaff Dandy Irvine.

“ Look here, Dandy,” he burst into the next tent, but his chum was not there.

“ Not there. Lord, how I shall miss him,” thought the Blackguard, strolling miserably towards the river. “ Ah, there he is, sitting just where we sat the night before I turned good. What a fool I was to do it.”

He sat down beside the little Corporal.

“ Did the Colonel give you a letter for me ? ”

“ Yes—here it is. You have two weeks' leave from to-night.”

La Mancha told him all that the Colonel had said.

“ You're in luck, old chap.”

“ Now, don't you get mawkish,” said the Blackguard roughly. “ The Colonel was bad enough, but I won't stand any rot from you. After all these years,—ye

The Blackguard

gods, what a wrench it is ! I'm as weak as a kitten, and all my bones feel sick. Come over to the lines—I'm going to take my horse these last two weeks, whether they like it or not."

"There'll be an awful row," said Dandy anxiously.

"So much the better. Trouble and I are twins, but I'll have my horse."

"I guess I can stand the racket," said Dandy, as they walked to the lines.

Last post was sounding while La Mancha saddled, and in the midst of his work he turned on Dandy.

"Don't look at me like that ! It's all your fault for making me turn respectable. It's against Nature. What would the civilians think if all of you turned into brass-mounted saints like me ? Why, they would be sending their sons into the Force for convent training, and adulterate the grandest cavalry in the world. There"—he loosed his horse and flung himself into the saddle. "Cut it short," for Dandy could not let go his hand. "Say good-bye to the boys for me. Good-night—good-bye, and be hanged to you."

So he rode out of the camp at a head-

The Blackguard

long gallop ; but half a mile away drew rein, for " Lights out " was sounding. He took off his hat, and brushed his sleeve across his eyes, because there seemed to be a mist between him and the tents, while through his mind there swept the music of an old-time song which belongs to the Mounted Police —

" The sentry challenged at the open gate,
Who pass'd him by, because the hour was late—
 ' Halt ! Who goes there ? '—' A friend '—
 ' All's well.'
 ' A friend, old chap ! '—a friend's farewell,
 And I had pass'd the gate.
And then the long last notes were shed,
The echoing call's last notes were dead—
And sounded sadly as I stood without
Those last sad notes of all : ' Lights out ! '
 ' Lights out !

Good-bye, you fellows ! We have side by side
Watch'd history's lengthen'd shadows past us
glide,
And worn the scarlet, laughed at pain,
And buried comrades lowly lain,
And let the long years glide ;
And toil and hardship have we borne,
And followed where the flag had gone—
But all the echoes answer'ing round about
Have bidden you to sleep : ' Lights out ! '
 ' Lights out ! '

The Blackguard

And never more for me the helmet's flash,
The trumpet's summons—Oh, the crumbling
ash

Of life is hope's fruition: Fall
The wither'd friendships, and they all
Are sleeping! Fast away
The fabrics of our lives decay,
And change unseen and melt away—
Ay, perish like the accents of a call,
Like those last notes of all: 'Lights out!'
'Lights out!'"

CHAPTER XVI

THE Blackguard was a terror to evil-minded horses, heavy enough when he chose to almost break their backs, strong enough to inflict most merciless punishment, alert to outwit all manner of devilry, because he had the gift of seeing things from the horse point of view. When they submitted, he could be gentle enough, but that they had to find out by surrendering first to his mastery. He had a wonderful way of disarming the fears and winning the confidence of frightened colts, so that, while the dangerous animals feared him, the gentler beasts found him the best of friends. There is no doubt that from the very start he was the best "buck hero" ever known in Kootenay. Too heavy for a cowboy, he was an excellent teamster, a fairly good hand with an axe, so that

The Blackguard

General Buster's only misgiving was the fear of losing him.

But he was not happy—a big tree hauled out by the roots cannot be expected to have a very joyful time just at first. Besides that, a thirty years' habit of being bad is stronger than a four months' habit of being good. It seemed now that to be virtuous was to lose all the fun. He would drift a little, and haul up with a jerk; he would rebuke with hard fists some champion of the cowboys; then, thinking that he had done something wrong, look up the Selkirk foothills as though he hoped for further guidance from the Throne. From the skin outwards this Blackguard was an epitome of hardened wickedness, inwardly like a big child. After being thirty years or so without a soul, he was bewildered with the new possession which had delicate little sympathies to be exercised, a kindliness toward men and beasts past all restraint, a weakness for Miss Violet Burrows far stronger than himself. So far as he could see, with limited powers of introspection, his internal anatomy consisted of love and whims.

The Blackguard

In his bewilderment he wrote to the Padre describing these symptoms, a letter which was received by the Curate with howls of laughter.

If the Blackguard's troubles were comic in the valley, Miss Violet's were tragic upon the mountain. Mr. Burrows had begun to fancy himself as a disciplinarian, confined Miss Violet to the house, and explained his views at great length every evening.

"I will have no more of this nonsense. Your business, Mr. Ramsay, is mining machinery, not the perpetration of matrimony. Matrimony, sir, is a nuisance—early matrimony an utter absurdity. I have always disapproved of"—

"I may mention," said the Tenderfoot, bristling, "that with your consent I am engaged to Miss Violet."

"Booh!" said Miss Violet softly all to herself, looking out upon these lords of creation from behind the sitting-room door. So far as Mr. Burrows knew, the wicked girl was locked up for the night in her own chamber, but then, Mr. Burrows knew very little about anything human, nor did he perceive the elementary

The Blackguard

facts about a woman. It never occurred to Miss Violet that she was other than very sleepy until he turned the key for her safe keeping. Then she became wide-awake, tried the door, poked about in the lock with a bent hairpin, and to her utter astonishment found that she could release the bolt. So, dressed like an angel in fluttering white, with bare pink feet and mane of streaming hair, she crept across the sitting-room, wondered what the men were plotting in the verandah, and took her station in the shadow behind the door. She stood on one leg timorously, thus leaving only five toes to be preyed upon by imaginary mice, the other foot being curled up because it was cold. Then, when the Tenderfoot announced himself to her Uncle as still engaged to be married, Miss Violet whispered "Booh !"

"Moreover," continued Mr. Ramsay loftily, "my immediate marriage was included in the terms of our agreement as to the mine."

"How dare you dictate to me ?"

"You'll see how I dare. Look here,

The Blackguard

Burrows, your accounts, as I showed you to-day, are all botched up."

Mr. Burrows calmed down partially. "Bah! a trifling oversight like that is not of the slightest consequence. Besides, I would have you realise that I am no mere accountant."

"So I'm writing to the firm at home. They'll turn loose a mere actuary over there."

Mr. Burrows gasped. "To the best of my knowledge and belief"—

"You submit a false balance-sheet backed by an affidavit,—which is perjury in London, Burrows, perjury."

"Bosh! Of course, I must look over the figures before they are actually sent off."

"No, you don't," muttered Mr. Ramsay, who was not half such a fool as he looked.

"What do you say?"

"Oh, nothing. Have you another cigar with you?"

"Here; let me light it for you."

There was a pause for the ceremony.

"Yes," continued Mr. Burrows, "there is, as you say, much room for discussion

The Blackguard

on both sides. I cannot disguise from you my own anxiety as to the fate of my niece should this disreputable character succeed, as you anticipate, in"—

"A runaway match?" Mr. Ramsay pressed home his advantage. "Of course, you sneered and sneered, although I've warned you again and again that his plans are well-nigh completed. This must be prevented, Mr. Burrows."

"What do you suggest?"

"Well, this experimental mill of yours has got to be wrecked and abandoned anyway. On that the firm insists, and your excuses for delay are getting too thin, Burrows,—altogether too thin."

Mr. Burrows groaned.

"This business of yours, Burrows, must be reported as an utter failure, or we shall find the new ground held at fancy prices. We could have the mill burned to-night by accident, the wedding to-morrow at the Mission; then, you see, Miss Violet would be safe from the Blackguard."

Miss Violet had heard enough, in all conscience, yet for a moment she could not move. Her curled-up foot went

The Blackguard

boldly down among the imaginary mice upon the floor, for this was more exciting even than live rats. She shivered a little, partly in compliment to the autumn chill, but more with cold fright. Then her growing resentment made the warm blood race through her veins. She flushed with indignation, and in another minute, boiling over with rage, would have rushed out upon her enemies. But no ; on second thoughts, she had a man to do her fighting, a big brave man, whose wickedness would be turned toward her adversaries, whose love toward herself.

"Blackguard," she whispered into the air,—“dear true Blackguard, you might be ever so bad, but you're not a coward like this Charlie.”

Silently she crept across the room, in breathless terror unlocked the back door of the cabin and looked out. The chill struck her instantly. She glanced doubtfully at her bare feet, then, because she could hardly feel respectable even by starlight no better dressed than one of the angels, she stole to her bedroom for clothes. There panic seized her, so, grabbing up a cloak and a pair of slippers,

The Blackguard

she fled out into the solitude of the hills. Across the open she ran from cover to cover, from rock to rock, stopping at times, holding her breath as she looked back, lest some crackling twig should betray her. One slipper was lost already in a morass, but she went on, her poor bare foot bleeding with a cut from some stone. Her long hair caught among the branches when she had gained the wood, and all the shadows of the trees were full of awful eyes, of staring spectres, of nameless beasts who would spring out upon her if she looked. Down the long hills she fled, stumbling, falling, tearing her cloak, suffering agonies from thorns and stones, and greater agonies from things unseen. And so the poor child came sobbing to the Tough Nut cabin. The good prospectors would take a message for her; they need not see her, because she would hide, and when she had roused them with her cries would speak to them out of the very deep shadows.

But when she called and called there was no answer; when at last she dared come nearer, creeping up with many a

The Blackguard

start of sudden fright, she saw a padlock glimmering on the door. The cabin was empty, the prospectors were away.

"Shorty!" she cried. "Oh, Long Leslie, where are you? Help! Help!"

The silence sank down heavily upon the woods, all the spaces of the hills lay in a breathless slumber, from the black sky dead Alps looked down like ghosts, and the stars were so far away.

"What shall I do, dearest? How shall I bring you to me. Oh, my love, my love!"

She sank down sobbing upon the ground, the ground which was all covered with gleaming pine chips left by the miners' axes, the chips which they always used to kindle fires. To kindle fires? She looked up, wiping the tears away with her long hair. They used these scented chips to kindle fires, and she would kindle such a blaze that night that the news of it should go forth all over the valley. Then the Blackguard would come to see what was the matter.

So she set off along the hillside, racked with miserable cold, with bitter pain, the tears dried stiff upon her cheeks, and

The Blackguard

dragged herself to the mill, the mill which was to be burned in any case. There should be no doubt as to the mill. She opened the lower door, the office door—there upon the table were papers. He had been working there all day—had been very tired—had forgotten this once to put them into the safe. There was a bunch of matches beside them, and on the ground outside bushels of chips to make the fire burn up, and in the corner of the office a five-gallon can of lamp oil. So she piled up her fuel against the outer wall.

That night there was a blaze upon the mountains, the mill and the woods were all afire. So news went out along the valley.

CHAPTER XVII

THE Blackguard, coming to the mill at high noon, found it a smouldering ruin, and the woods above a smoking waste, full of charred trunks. Going round by way of the Tough Nut Claim, he gained the upper moorland, wrapped in a choking dry mist, out of which rose the Throne cabins, gaunt, spectral, desolate. The doors were locked, the windows barred hastily across with a few rough planks, the stable empty. Down the hills he rode, his black horse lathered with sweat, his face haggard as he followed the trail of three riders. Ramsay had led, Miss Violet followed, Burrows taking the rear, all down the swaying curves of the steep places, and along the sinuous path through heavy timber. They had not stayed to even pack their clothes; they had not watered their horses at the spring; they had moved before daybreak, to judge by the blundering course, and Miss Violet

The Blackguard

had left here and there tokens, as though he needed any further incentive, shreds of white among fallen leaves, torn from a handkerchief.

At last the Blackguard drew rein at the foot of the mountains. He looked towards the camp where lay Arrapahoe Bill, tended by the Mexican, recovering from an interview with a grizzly bear; he looked along the trail toward the Mission, whither, to judge by the scraps of cambric, Miss Violet had been carried much against her will; and he looked across the valley to where the tents of the Mounted Police encampment glimmered white in the afternoon sun. It was useless to trouble the cowboys, useless to ride to the Mission unless he had some sort of authority for interference; better to get help from the camp. Trusting that the Padre would have sense enough to delay the travellers, he set off at a hand-gallop for Wild Horse Creek.

By mid-afternoon he gained the camp, an hour later rode out again on a fresh horse, accompanied by Dandy Irvine. Both men were armed, both in uniform, for they rode this time on Her Majesty's service.

The Blackguard

"Do you know," said Dandy, while they splashed across the ford, "that this was to have been your wedding-day?"

"Was to have been? It is my wedding-day."

"Do you know that the Colonel went off alone this morning, bound for the Mission?"

"To give the bride away," said the Blackguard, grinning. "I knew he would keep his promise."

Gaining the top of the bench-land, they rode off at a canter across the valley, through meadows scathed with an early frost, by poplar bush, where the leaves hung sere and yellow, or fluttered dead to earth. The wind was keen from the north, the sky was overcast with wintry cloud, and distant woods loomed faint in a bluish haze.

"How do you know," asked Dandy, "that they fired the mill? It might have been accident."

"I'm not quite blind," answered the Blackguard. "There was a five-gallon can of kerosene lying outside the ruins."

"Well?"

"It was empty."

"What of that?"

The Blackguard

"It was new, without a dint from being knocked about, or any dirt from having been used for filling lamps. Whoever burned the mill poured five gallons of oil over the kindlings, then chucked the empty can out through the door."

"What else?"

"Beside the can lay a half-burned torch of paper, thrown away as the blessed incendiary ran for his blessed life."

"Did you keep the torch and can?"

"Left them untouched for evidence. D'ye take me for a two-months' rootie?"

"No; but I'm just about half sorry for the great inventor."

Night had fallen when the two policemen rode up to the Mission-house. Within, Miss Burrows, the Colonel, and the Curate were playing an innocent game of cards; without, in the porch, sat Mr. Burrows and the Tenderfoot disputing hotly, but they brought their discussion to an abrupt close at the sight of Mounted Police.

"Good-evening, Mr. Irvine," said Burrows easily, as the Corporal dismounted, handing his rein to La Mancha. "You'll find your commanding officer inside the house, playing with my niece a game called animal grab."

The Blackguard

The Tenderfoot was staring hard at La Mancha as he led the horses away.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Burrows,"—the Corporal produced two blue documents from his breast-pocket,—“the game I have come to play here is called human grab. You, Mr. Burrows, and you, Mr. Ramsay, are my prisoners.”

“What?”

Dandy Irvine presented the warrants, but the violent expostulations of the prisoners brought the Curate and the Colonel hurriedly to the door.

“What's all this?” said the Colonel. “Why, Corporal Irvine, surely you've made some mistake?”

Dandy saluted. “Will you look at the warrants, sir?”

The Colonel took one, glanced at it by the lamplight within, and handed it back to Corporal Irvine. “This is very serious, Mr. Burrows,—a charge of arson cannot be lightly passed over, and Corporal Irvine has only carried out his orders.”

The prisoners were loudly protesting their innocence, Mr. Burrows declaiming on points of law and usage; Mr. Ramsay almost in tears; but the Colonel required their silence.

The Blackguard

"Are you alone, Irvine?"

"No, sir. Constable La Mancha is with me. He has taken the horses round to the corral."

"Go, then, tell him to saddle the prisoners' horses and my own. I will be responsible till you return. Padre," he turned to the Curate, "may Miss Burrows remain as your guest?"

Constable La Mancha was at the back door embracing Miss Burrows when Dandy called him away. "Come, none of that," he said briefly; "I want you at the stables."

"All right, Corporal,"—La Mancha went on embracing Miss Burrows,—"be with you in a minute."

"Don't cry, dear, there's nothing to frighten you; but I had to get your Uncle out of the way."

"But he's innocent!" she cried. "You ought to take me to prison for burning the mill. It was me."

"The deuce!"

"You know, dear, I had to make some sort of signal."

"To bring me, eh? Well, I don't object to signalling—at least, not very much. Now, after we've gone, you make

The Blackguard

it all right with the Padre. Tell him the whole story, and get him up very early in the morning. I'll be back by sunrise for the wedding."

"By sunrise?" she blushed hotly; "I never said I'd marry you, though."

"No, I was much too big a blackguard, but now it's different, Miss Violet, quite different, you minx. I never burned *my* Uncle's mill. I was never half so wicked."

She laughed with delight at her own wickedness.

"Kiss me," he said, and that she did right heartily.

"Come, Blackguard," Dandy was quivering with impatience. "You fool, you're spoiling the whole game. Hurry up!"

So La Mancha was dragged away to the stables, where in due course the prisoners' horses were saddled, also the Colonel's grey charger. Then came the champing of horses' bits, the mounting of men, farewells, and the filing-off of a solemn procession into the night. But Miss Violet was left behind for safe keeping, who, with her humble confession, her tears, and a very few smiles, softened the Padre's heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

GREAT was the stir and turmoil at Wild Horse Creek. Long before daylight, while all the gear was stiff with a rime of frost, tents were struck, kit bags loaded, blankets rolled ; and after breakfast these, together with the Quartermaster's stores, mess kit, nosebags, and all the equipments of a summer camp, were bestowed upon the transport wagons. At noon the troop was to march on the first short stage of a journey across the Rocky Mountains by the Crow's Nest Pass to the winter station, the divisional headquarters on the Great Plains.

But the wheels of routine were jarred long before mid-day. The Colonel had, as a magistrate, to hear the charge of incendiarism brought against the prisoners, Burrows and Ramsay. Moreover, Regimental Number 1107, Constable La Mancha, on the expiration of his term of service, was to "turn in" his kit, to

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receive his discharge, and to be struck off the strength of the Force. But neither could the arson case be examined for lack of the chief witness, nor could La Mancha be discharged until he had surrendered his horse, arms, accoutrements, and clothing. And the Blackguard was absent without leave.

The Colonel was furious, reviled the Sergeant-Major, placed the Corporal of the Guard under arrest, also the picket for permitting La Mancha's midnight defection; the Sergeant-Major hurt the cook's feelings by the tone in which he ordered the unpacking of camp equipment for dinner; the men waited comfortless beside their horses; and all with one accord reviled the Blackguard. But when the culprit rode in at noon, accompanied by a lady whom he blandly presented to the Sergeant-Major as the Señora La Mancha, D Troop changed its mind, greeting the Blackguard with three rousing cheers. From the Colonel to the troop dog all realised that the presence of a lady in camp had changed the situation, particularly as the lady was obviously attractive—a maid so sweetly shy that everything must be

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done to set her at ease, to smooth the roughness of her surroundings, to show D Troop on its best behaviour.

Leaving his wife in charge of Dandy Irvine, as the most presentable man in the division, La Mancha went about the camp raking up ill-conditioned rags and worn-out garments to represent his kit, which was to be delivered over to the authorities, together with his arms and accoutrements. At another time the Quartermaster would have asked what scarecrow had been robbed, now he received the whole mess of rubbish with his blandest smile. Changing into his cowboy equipment, the Blackguard gave away his Government clothes to all who would accept them as his parting gift, reserving only a fine buffalo overcoat, a set of blankets, and some underwe for future use.

The Colonel hastily, sitting as magistrate, found means to discharge his prisoners on the ground of insufficient evidence. Then the Sergeant-Major presented La Mancha's discharge, filled in with the obvious falsehood that his character and behaviour were both, and had always been, "very good."

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"Now, La Mancha," said the Colonel, "besides your pay you are entitled to transport and sustenance to your place of enlistment—Winnipeg. Will you have cash or a requisition?"

"Cash, sir."

The Colonel wrote out a cheque to cover the costs of this imaginary journey of twelve hundred miles, a second cheque for La Mancha's pay up to date, and a third in lieu of a wedding present from the officers of the division.

Dinner followed, Dandy and all the non-commissioned officers fighting among themselves for the right to serve the Señora La Mancha, who sat in state upon a buffalo coat near their camp fire, all smiles and blushes. This was her wedding breakfast, served under the frosty blue sky by a swarm of soldiers, who one and all would have offered with the beef and bread their hearts and hands, but for the prior claims of their comrade.

Meanwhile the Blackguard, respectfully declining invitations from the Officers' and Sergeants' Messes, dined for the last time with the troop, and afterwards, when pipes were lit before the saddling, accepted a wedding present

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from D Division which would materially help in his provision for married life.

Only Mr. Burrows and Mr. Ramsay, discharged from their arrest and welcomed by the Officers' Mess, were discontented with the wintry sunlight, the dry bright wind, the scent of the dying summer. Outwitted by the Blackguard, humiliated in their summary treatment by the law, their grievance received hilariously as a huge joke, they were only too glad to excuse themselves with a plea of pressing business at the Throne, while their crestfallen departure after dinner provoked the troop to a burst of ironical cheering.

But the Blackguard and his Señora, mounted on horses lent by the Sergeant-Major, rode out with the troop on its first stage down the valley, an adventure which Violet La Mancha will ever remember as the most delightful thing in her life. Indeed, it was a sight to stir one's blood, that march of frontier cavalry, to see the big bronzed men sitting their horses with careless grace, the tough, wiry bronchos walking sedately after a canter, the transport lumbering briskly in the midst, and all

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down the long double line of riders the gleam of blue rifle barrels, a glitter of belts, a glow of scarlet.

The valley reached away on every side in all its loveliness of bush and prairie, on either side hung white Alps above the misty blue of distant forest, and over all were soft little clouds like herds of driven sheep, while the sun raced westward to his setting through dim immensities of sky.

"See," said the Blackguard proudly to his wife, "yonder, right at the foot of the hills, I've built a cabin for you of great big logs, and the chinks are all filled in with moss to make it cosy. The hearth is in the snuggest corner, and all the furniture is made with an axe of clean red cedar, smelling ever so fresh, like pencils. You can look out among the pine trees down to the creek, which is full of trout for our supper, and I've chopped away the bush, so that when we sit by the door after sundown we can see right away across the valley to the great high peaks above the Crow's Nest Pass. Will you be contented, little one?"

"Yes, I shall always be content, because I have you, my great big Blackguard—and I love you."

CHAPTER XIX

DEEP lay the snow in Kootenay. All across the prairies the great drifts were like ocean rollers frozen,—against the clumps of timber they were heaped like winter surf, around the cabin curled over to windward like a breaking wave. One could stand upon the comb of that wave, so solid was it; indeed, the Señora La Mancha had chosen the point of vantage from whence to search the trail for some sign of her husband's coming, because he was late afield after stray cattle, and it was long past supper time. Grey clouds were trailing across the moon, casting shadows down which might have been moving men or beasts among the timber; but when the light shone clear again on glittering frosty pines and dead white drifts, it left an aching emptiness as far as the eye could reach against the

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intense cold, for it was 30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. The little Señora was guarded by a robe of beaver skins from her bed, but her head was uncovered, so that the moonlight caught her hair with an icy lustre, and her congealed breath was wafted back, filming over her rosy face with hoar frost. Despite her anxiety for the Blackguard, who might well have been delayed by a serious accident, she felt with every breath the racy intoxicating freshness of the air; so, when a frost-bite stabbed the tip of one ear like a red-hot needle, she only took some powdery snow in her mittened hand to rub the white place red again. After all, a frost-bite is nothing more serious than a sneeze in the hardy West, so Violet La Mancha danced a little dance on the snow-drift, then, warm again to her finger-tips, awaited her husband's coming.

He came at last, galloping up the trail with a lusty yell or so by way of greeting, and, waving her handkerchief in response, the housewife fled indoors to serve a steaming supper. Ten minutes afterwards, when he came floundering in from the stable, and shook the snow

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from his clothes like a big rough dog, he found the beef and tea set out on the table.

"Feed the brute," said he. "The Wolf could gobble up Mrs. Wolf for an after-thought. Wough, but it's cold,—and you should have heard me cursing the runaway steers."

"That's good, letting off the fireworks where they do no harm, in the open. Why, some men keep all that for the little wife. Sit down, Blackguard, we've got a lovely stew, and three real onions in it. Oh, I've been ever so lonely!"

"Serve you jolly well right for being a cowboy's wife. Lonely, you minx, you'd be lonelier still if I hadn't caught you in time three months ago."

"Three months! three whole big months flown like a dream. Only think! You've cheated me out of three long months of my life, you darling. Now pull those nasty icicles off your moustache, or how can I possibly kiss you?"

"Sweet little lover; we've spent three months in heaven, and only had fresh meat once in all that time."

"Love and fresh meat, 'that's what men are made of.'"

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So they supped merrily, and washed up afterwards, both talking at once, and all the time of cattle and domestic details mixed; and then she filled and lit his pipe, he growling amiably of her manifest incompetence in these arts, she being a woman.

"Has the mail come?" he asked.

"Yes; only one wretched paper."

"Give me the wretched paper."

He read a little, while she set a bucket to peel potatoes, using hot water lest the ice should form under her knife.

"Here," he said, "I'm sleepy with the heat of that confounded stove. You take the paper. I'll keep awake best if I peel the potatoes for you."

She looked up, tears swimming in her eyes. "When I was up at the Throne, Mr. Ramsay liked to watch me peeling potatoes."

"What a cad! Well, he gets his deserts—wealth from the Burrows' inventions beyond the very dreams of avarice, and much good may it do him."

"And I have a log-cabin, a nest to keep warm for my big true Blackguard,

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and thanks to say on my knees to God for love. What does it matter all this stuff in the paper?" She laid it on her lap, watching his comic clumsiness at the peeling. "The world outside doesn't matter one little bit to us."

"Read anyway," he said, grinning, "or you'll drop into poetry next."

"'Horrible Murder,'" she read, yawning. "Oh, I wish it was bedtime. 'Suicide of a Vegetarian.' 'Fuss, Box, & Co. in Bankruptcy.' 'The Railroad Horror.' Hello, here, under the Cavalry heading, there's Dandy Irvine—Sergeant Irvine—got a commission. They've made him an Inspector."

"Good old Dandy! We'll drink his health next time I can buy the ingredients."

"I don't want ingredients," she said, pouting; "he's such a little dear, and you can never keep tidy, however I dust you and scrub. Must I read any more? Well, here's the British Empire column. 'London, February 6—Death of the Spanish Ambassador. We regret to say,'"—

The Blackguard whistled softly.

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"Well," she looked up, "what's the matter? Did you know him?"

"Why, that's the Snob."

"The what?"

"My brother. I asked him once whether he'd have a long life or his habits. He had the habits, and I hope he enjoyed them. Poor Snob, I guess he's left me the reversion of his debts." The Blackguard finished peeling the last potato, and handed over the pan. "Will your Grace be pleased to put these potatoes away?"

"What do you mean?"

"Only, my little wife, that you are a Duchess now."

"A Duchess? What nonsense!" Coming across to his chair, she kissed him tenderly upon the forehead. "I'm nothing," she said, with a gay little laugh, "but Mrs. Blackguard."

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